

CHRISTIAN FUNERALS IN LIGHT OF AMERICAN
ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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ABSTRACT

This project arrives at Christian perspectives on funerals. It contributes to the effort to break the conspiracy of silence that surrounds a topic which is still tinged with taboo. The author approaches the subject as a Christian, as one who finds help in the Christian faith for encountering the realities of life and death.

Assuming that we need to understand what is happening in our society with respect to death in order to design meaningful funerals, the discussion begins in Chapter One with an examination of American attitudes toward death. It is a description and critique of escapism. Included in the discussion is the absence of our direct contact with death, our emphasis on youth, our isolation of the elderly and dying and dead, our taboo on conversation about death, our reaction to death in the mass media, the impossibility of social immortality in the nuclear age, and the contributions of urbanization and the changes in family structure and funeral customs to death-denial.

Chapter Two draws some conclusions about the meaning of death from biblical views and other images. In asking whether mortality is a consequence of sin or humanity's natural condition, the author argues for the latter understanding. In considering whether the Christian community should proclaim the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body, the author shows that resurrection is the appropriate symbol of hope. The Chapter

also includes discussion of our assurance as we face the mystery of death, reasons why we fear death, and positive values of death.

Chapter Three, "Coming to Terms with Death: Grief Work," gives a basic understanding of what is involved in providing healing for the living. The topics considered include: the privilege of grieving, the need for expression, the hazards of repression, the dynamics and duration of grief, anticipatory grief, and children and grief.

Given the factors in Chapters One through Three, the final Chapter concerns itself with the importance and valuable functions of Christian funerals. Without attempting to work out every practice in detail or find molds into which everyone should fit, this Chapter deals with the need for variability, and funeral arrangements, practices and elements. The project concludes with "A Christian Funeral" and "A Committal Service."

INTRODUCTION

"In this world
nothing is certain
but death and taxes."
--Benjamin Franklin¹

This is a project about death. More specifically, it is a reassessment of Christian funerals in the light of what is happening to American attitudes toward death. As a person who plays a very significant role in the design of funerals, I work to make the funeral meaningful and helpful. The value of my research and writing is that it will prepare me for the specific function of leading meaningful funerals. To do this I need to understand the dynamics operating in our culture and the dynamics of dealing with grief. I need to be educated for handling death and bereavement, to offer comfort, to provide healing for the living. This challenge is a worthy one.

Our usual approach to death is not to approach it at all--until we have to. The Church never says much about death except on Memorial Day, Easter, and at funerals. The more "respectable" the Church has become, the more it has ignored death. The Church can make a significant contribution today in arriving at Christian perspectives on funerals. Rather than being an agent of conservation, the Church can be an agent of change.

¹
F. Belton Joyner, Jr., "Free to Live, Free To Die,"
Christian Studies For Late Teens, II (Summer 1975), 2

People would like to prevent death. But as long as we are born, we have the destiny to die--no one can substitute for us. Unless we deny the evidence of our senses we must realize that our own lives will end sometime (after about 26,280 days). This century has known the obscenities of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Biafra, Southeast Asia. The life insurance companies do their best to keep us reminded of the inevitable: "BUY NOW! Time stoops to no man's (or woman's) lure" (Presbyterian Ministers' Fund). The electroencephalogram may replace the mirror held before the mouth, but death continues to confront us. As the twentieth century French writer Andre Maurois whimsically observed, "Despite the progress of science the percentage of deaths still remains 100."² The death rate is still one per person. There is no danger that death will cease to be "current."

My academic concern with the subject of death is not new. During my undergraduate work in the social sciences I explored how we are educated for death. How a person handles death indicates a great deal about how she/he approaches life. Cultures can be analyzed and described by their attitudes toward death. My concern has been stirred by my theological education.

² Hoover Rupert, Where is thy Sting? (Nashville: Graded Press, 1969), p. 14.

However, my concern with death can never be merely professional. While death is something that will occur to all living beings, it also will occur to me. Whether I want to or not, I am destined to confront it. I can hide from it or attempt to postpone it, but I cannot escape its certainty. I have a limited life time; there is a "deadline." There will be a death certificate for me.

People ask me, "Don't you find the subject of death morbid?" On the contrary, interest in death need not be gloomy or unwholesome. Rather, it is unhealthy to repress discussion of such an important subject.

In the nineteenth century sex was taboo; if not talked about, sex was somehow supposed to disappear. During the first three-quarters of the twentieth century death has been taboo. During the last decade there has been a healthy reaction against the taboo on speaking of death. It now appears that we are, once again, permitting the reality of death to become part of our consciousness. The conspiracy of silence is beginning to be listed and the silence broken, at least in the academic community.

When it rains, it pours. Currently, death is a very lively topic. Many are making a living out of death. We are now flooded with books and articles, many of which are repetitive; but a few bring sensitivity and new insight. Death is becoming a popular subject for debate and discussion. Schools are offering courses on death and dying. Students are encouraged to draw their life lines, to write their own

obituaries or epitaphs, and to talk with someone else about anticipating one's own death. Even with the current status of interest in and inquiry about the phenomena of death, it is still tinged with taboo. Our society is prudish about death.

DELIMITATIONS

I approach the subject of death and funerals as a Christian, one who finds in the Christian faith a way of encountering the vital matters of life. The Christian faith has helped me find meaning in both the realities of life and death.

This Professional Project does not deal with the whole corpus on death. I leave many doors unopened. I focus on death and its survivors, but I do not intend to treat the topic of death exhaustively. I would be the last to claim finality for my efforts. Nonetheless, I hope to open fresh perspectives on Christian funerals.

In this attempt I may raise more questions than I answer and create more problems than I solve. I render decisions on numerous complex problems--probably to the chagrin of many of my colleagues. Naturally, it is an altogether impossible task to decide on every individual issue, with its abundance of subtle nuances and complex ramifications.

In spelling out my convictions and suggesting some of the implications, I expect and welcome discussion of my views. Every reader will, I hope, dialogue with me as she/he is reading this paper.

CHAPTER DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 1: "Passing On" in America

"We spend our lives trying to take our minds off death."--Blaise Pascal, seventeenth century philosopher-theologian³

Being persuaded that our cultural environment has extreme effect on the ways we think and feel, the discussion begins with an examination of the ways death is dealt with in American society. This chapter is a description and critique of the basic escapism of our attitudes toward death. This escapism is revealed in the statement one man once made to his wife: "If one of us dies, I'll go to Paris." Included in the discussion is the absence of our direct contact with death, our emphasis on youth, our isolation of the elderly and dying and dead, our taboo on conversation about death, our reaction to death statistics, the impossibility of social immortality in the nuclear age, and the contributions of urbanization and the changes in family structure and funeral customs to death denial. We need to understand what is happening in our society with respect

³ Russell Chandler, "The American Way of Death Is Changing," Los Angeles Times (June 7, 1975), Part I, p. 1, col. 1.

to death in order to design meaningful funerals.

Chapter 2: Perspectives on Dying, Death, and Beyond

Chapter Two confronts five questions: Is mortality a consequence of sin or humanity's natural condition? Should we proclaim the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body? What is our assurance as we face the mystery of death? Why do we fear death? What about the positive values of death? Admittedly, due to the limitation in size of a Doctor of Ministry Professional Project, these questions only scratch the surface. But by exploring biblical views and other images some conclusions are made about the meaning of death.

Chapter 3: Coming to Terms with Death: Grief Work

This part of the project deals with the privilege of grieving, the need for expression, the hazards of repression, the dynamics and duration of grief, anticipatory grief, and children and grief. This not intended to be an exhaustive or in-depth study of grief, rather it is an attempt to be prepared to speak with some degree of authority in the fourth chapter of this project.

Chapter 4: Christian Funerals

Given the factors in Chapters One through Three, this part of the project concerns itself with the importance

and valuable functions of Christian funerals. What should funerals try to do? The Church needs to assert itself in this area, to assume leadership and take on the responsibility of articulating sensitive, helpful, and meaningful funerals.

This is not an effort to work out every practice in detail. I do not find pat answers and molds into which everyone should fit. In discussing the funeral itself, this chapter deals with the need for variability, and funeral arrangements, practices and elements. The project concludes with "A Christian Funeral."

Chapter 1

"PASSING ON" IN AMERICA

Attitudes toward death are changing in America as a result of shifts and changes within the culture itself. An attitude predisposes one to act in a certain way. Dr. Herman Feifel says:

We are mistaken to consider death as a purely biological event. The attitudes concerning it and its meaning for the individual serve as an important organizing principle in determining how he conducts himself in life.¹

"One cannot look directly at either the sun or death," according to de la Rochefoucauld.² Death has become a top taboo subject to be avoided or disguised.

CONTACT WITH DEATH

Previous Societies

In "primitive" societies, death is given conscious thought; it is everywhere. Margaret Mead reported that Americans in contrast to Samoans, try to protect their

¹ Herman Feifel, "Attitudes Toward Death in Some Normal and Mentally Ill Populations," in his The Meaning of Death (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 114-130.

² Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1972), p. 33.

children from direct contact with and observations of death and the dead. In Samoa, "all children had seen birth and death" and "had seen many dead bodies" besides having "often witnessed the operation of cutting open any dead body to search out the causes of death." The same uninhibited attitude toward death is found generally in African tribes.³

In Colonial America, all members of a community were somewhere involved in the death of a member and death was a common event. Almost everyone, by the time he was an adolescent, had personally witnessed a death, usually at home, of some loved one--a baby brother or sister, a mother or father. During the nineteenth century, it was extremely difficult for the average person to avoid coming into regular contact with death--death rates were high, and the average life expectancy at mid-century could not have been much greater than half of what it is today. For example, childhood deaths were so frequent at that time that prayer books contained at least five or six poems about meeting lost children in heaven. Individuals were thus in constant contact with death, and they were thereby compelled to recognize it as a very real phenomenon.⁴

³ Robert Fulton and Gilbert Geis, "Death and Social Values," in Robert Fulton (ed.) Death and Identity (New York: Wiley, 1965) p. 68.

⁴ Barbara Jones, Design for Death Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 11.

Twentieth Century America

Today, there are approximately two million deaths a year out of a population of 210 million; so, about one percent of the American population dies each year. Most deaths (almost seventy percent) in this country are deaths of old persons in the sixty-five and over age group. Less than six percent of the deaths that occur in this country now are deaths of children under fifteen years of age. In 1900, just seven decades ago, the majority of persons who died were children. In 1900, fifty-three percent of all deaths were children under fifteen. What we are dealing with here are some of the most significant social changes that have ever occurred in any society in any time of history. Death does not happen very close very often. The generation today just turning twenty-one is the first "death-free" generation in the history of the world. Statistics indicate that the chances are 5 out of 100 that members of this generation will have experienced a death within their immediate family before they reached their twenty-first birthday.⁵

⁵ Statement by Robert Fulton in an address ("Counseling and Grief") at The School of Theology at Claremont, February 21, 1974 (tape on file in School of Theology Library).

EVASION OF DEATH

Lengthened Life Expectancy

Today death is a top taboo subject for many reasons. Death is further from us than it used to be since disease and starvation are beginning to be controlled; children and young adults survive with the advancements in health-care services. We live longer. In 1900, the life expectancy for a man was forty-seven years; today it's seventy and a half years. Over twenty million Americans are over sixty-five; by the end of this decade there will be twenty-four or twenty-five million--an increase of almost twenty-five percent. There are twenty thousand people in this country now over one hundred years of age--and that group is growing.⁶

Emphasis on Youth

Youth is greatly emphasized and age devalued. Modern industrial America with its emphasis on youth, health, production, and longevity has come to view death as an infringement upon life. The younger I look, the better. To win the affection of one of my seniors all I have to do is gush that she does not look her age, or

⁶ Ibid.

that he certinly acts younger than he is. Looking wrinkled and creaky or dead is sin. But if Mom uses the right kind of dishwashing soap, you will not be able to tell her hands from her nineteen-year-old daughter's.

Isolation of the Elderly, Dying, and Dead

We are seldom brought face to face with death or the evidences of death. Our treatment of the elderly and the hospital's routinized care of the dead and dying coupled with the attitudes and behaviors of the doctors and nurses who serve the dying, reveal tendencies or desires to isolate, segregate, hide and ignore death. A society which accepts death would be unlikely to behave in this fashion.

Death and dying are so unsettling that we have created a society which denies the existence of the elderly by what Margaret Mead has called "a conspiracy of silence." We are a society which forces the retired into sequestered communities. Under a smoke screen of rationalizations, we condemn "senior citizens" to reservations where they are left to await fate in the same manner as the leper once did. We convince old people that living with others with whom they share only chronological age is natural and beneficial to them. We hope that they will enjoy themselves-- but away from us. We are asking the elderly to remove

themselves from our sight and thereby not force us to remember that we shall someday be as they.⁷

The family structure now rarely includes aged parents or grandparents. It is very rare to find young and old living together. We are not willing to go through old age with others. The young have no intention of living with the old.

Children are being denied the important discoveries about human existence that can be made by observing old age and death. The very old are denied the sense of renewal implicit in birth and childhood.⁸

In the nineteenth century, medical facilities being what they were, illness and death were more likely to have been a "household" experience than a hospital experience. Today, the terminally ill are carefully segregated from us. We have shifted the place of where we die. People die away from home, among strangers, uprooted from their natural surroundings, their home. Death is now an institutional matter. The family of the dead surrounding the deathbed has been replaced by the Medical Center and the mourners replaced by a choir of white coats. The majority of Americans (eighty-two percent is the current figure)⁹ can expect to die in a

⁷John Hinton, Dying (Harmendsworth: Penguin, 1967).

⁸John R. Silber, "The Pollution of Time," Center Magazine, IV (September/October 1971), 5.

⁹Statement by James Mathieu in an address ("Death and Dying") in course AM236 Contemporary Worship in the Free Churches, at The School of Theology at Claremont, April 15, 1975.

retirement community, convalescent home, or hospital. In cities like Los Angeles, close to nine out of ten deaths occur in public institutions.¹⁰ "Who can better take care of grandma than the experts--the specialists?"

Hospital practices also serve as useful indices of our society's denial of death. Numerous techniques have been developed to hide the fact of death in high mortality wards. Bodies are usually not removed during visiting hours, to ensure that visitors will not have to view death. Patients are similarly protected from death contacts by being removed to other rooms when ward-mates near death. Unexpected deaths that are noticed by those sharing the victim's room are considered troublesome since elaborate techniques are required to remove the corpse without offending the living.

In a textbook on Modern Concepts in Hospital Administration, a section describing the proper location for the morgue is highly suggestive of death denial in American hospitals:

The hospital morgue is best located on the ground floor and placed in an area inaccessible to the general public. It is important that the unit have a suitable exit leading onto a private loading platform which is concealed from the hospital patient and the general public.¹¹

¹⁰ Fulton, "Counseling and Grief".

¹¹ J. K. Owen, Modern Concepts of Hospital Administration (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1962), p. 304.

Once again the hospital evidently assumes that death should not be viewed by the public. Although the hospital might want to hide its "mistakes," certainly if the American public accepted death there would be no need for such carefully planned concealment. Since hospitals separate us from the dying person, the attitude arises that what is happening is not really so and will not take place.

Another attempt to camouflage death can be seen in the tendency to separate ourselves from those who are about to die. In a modern busy hospital, terrific isolation can be experienced. Children are excluded from most hospitals. The dying patient gets fewer visits of shorter duration. Relatives and friends withdraw and abandon the dying. Glaser and Strauss found that when a person in a hospital had been labelled as dying, the responses to his calls for assistance were ten times slower than before his labelling.¹² People are often "buried" before they are dead.

Taboo on Talking about Death

One of the more striking examples of this denial of death is the taboo on conversation concerning death, noted as early as 1936 by Pound. Pound could not resist slipping some puns into his discussion of euphemisms:

It appears, in fact, that one of mankind's gravest problems is to avoid straight-forward mention

¹² Mathieu, ["Death and Dying"]

of dying or burial. Every ingenuity is practiced to find words which will shroud the idea of death.¹³

At best, death suffers the same euphemistic treatment as excretion does in middle class American discourse. Both subjects are largely considered taboo for polite conversation and seem rarely to be the topic of serious discussion. In a society in which parents appear to strive to deal realistically with many of the former taboos of parent-child conversation, such as sex, the subject of death not only remains unspoken, but appears to be, by comparison, increasingly avoided and disguised. In a survey made by Psychology Today in August, 1970, a third of the thirty thousand readers who responded could not recall from childhood a single instance of discussion of death within the family circle.¹⁴ It is startling to note that in interviews with acute geriatric patients, as many as eighty-seven percent stated that they had never talked about death or dying.¹⁵ In the nineteenth century,

¹³ L. Pound, "American Euphemisms for Dying, Death and Burial: An Anthology," American Speech, XI (1936), 195.

¹⁴ Edwin Shneidman, "You and Death," Psychology Today, V (June 1971), 44.

¹⁵ A. E. Christ, "Attitudes Toward Death Among a Group of Acute Geriatric Psychiatric Patients," Journal of Gerontology, XVI (1961), 59.

sex was the pornographic subject: Instead of saying that a woman was pregnant, for example, one evasively said that she was "expecting the stork." The tables are now turned.

Edgar N. Jackson observes,

Whenever language becomes less open and honest and more evasive and devious, it becomes part of the conspiracy to avoid facing circumstances as they are.¹⁶

Words for death are getting softer. Life-insurance agents propose that you buy a policy "in case something happens." When you complete your Memorial Record and Guide at Forest Lawn Mortuaries you are sent an identification card so that in the event of "an emergency," the necessary arrangements can be made. Pets do not die, they are put to sleep. Flowers do not die; they fade and wither. The use of humor and euphemisms regarding death shows the general reluctance to accept its inevitability.

Professional doctors and nurses practice the art of disguise in the observance of their professional service. Death is cushioned with euphemisms. The term "expirations" is substituted for the word "deaths;" this substitution of an agreeable, inoffense expression is made for the term "deaths" which seems to suggest something unpleasant. Doctors refer to death with such phrases as "catastrophic diseases."

16

Edgar N. Jackson, For the Living (Des Moines: Channel Press, 1963), p. 58.

Medical practitioners can use white uniforms and speak their Greek-rooted gobbledygook instead of clear English. A doctor may joke to a cancer patient, "You better make your cemetery reservation now" and "the churches are busy." These are important parts of a routine designed to help them remain a few steps away from raw face-to-face confrontation with dying patients.

Funeral directors use a host of clever shields. They have invented an entire language of euphemisms and they gently force the bereaved to learn and speak it. Linguistically, a person "passes away," instead of dies. As a Christian expression of hope, the dead may have "passed to eternal rest," but, taking such a phrase in a euphemistic sense can be dangerous self-deception. The phrase "falling asleep," although originally a Biblical figure (cf., for example, John 11:11, Acts 13:36; I Corinthians 15:20), may be seen as an attempt to conceal the gravity of death and thus to falsify its reality.¹⁷ The funeral director's place of business is not a factory or an office but a "chapel" or a "home". The funeral director will invite you to view a "life-like" body resting peacefully in a "slumber room": "Mr. X" (the corpse) is "reposing" (laying out) before "he" (the corpse) is "interred" (buried) in a "space" (grave) at the "Memorial Park" graveyard.

¹⁷Josef Pieper, Death and Immortality, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 24, 26.

Clergypersons, also, have face-saving escapes. They can also flee intimacy with death. Unfamiliar language can keep patients at a distance. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow", "Our Father, who art in heaven", and silent prayers can rescue uneasy clergypersons from any but casual involvement.

It can be seen that the American taboo on death conversation reflects our denial of the reality of death. If it is reasonable to view this taboo as a product of the American death denial, it seems also reasonable to assume that it, along with many other manifestations of death denial, may reciprocally be viewed as a causative or contributory factor in the existence or persistence of death denial. We are reinforced in our denial, since the taboo on talking about death insures that we are seldom forced to admit its existence. Therefore, the taboo on death conversation in America may contribute to death denial as well as reflect it.

Even though death is not a popular topic of conversation, we cannot assume that this public denial of death extends completely into private lives. People do, indeed, think about death.

Reaction to Death in the Mass Media

Television entered the American home only shortly after death was removed from the home to nursing homes, hospitals, and funeral homes. Eighty percent of the American

households had a television set by 1952.¹⁸ Television promised to be an ideal medium for death education, replacing grandfathers who used to die at home and family wakes where grandma's body laid in the family parlor. Yet television missed its opportunity. Television tried, oh, how it tried. The news is news of death. We see war during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Over and over again we see deaths of yellow people, black people, strangers, aliens, foreigners, the enemy, and "others"--death comes to the other guy, but not to us. Newspapers are over-grown obituary columns. But our characteristic reaction to death statistics reflects our denial of the reality of death. When the mass media inform us of the death tolls in Southeast Asia or the number of automobile fatalities over a holiday weekend, we hear the figures, -we react to them as numbers, not as deaths. Television feeds our fantasy of forever being a spectator. Geoffrey Gorer says that the denial of death in the form of callousness is the only feasible reaction to the amount of misery, cruelty, and death to which we are exposed.¹⁹ It is quite inconceivable that one could react emotionally

¹⁸ Fulton, "Counseling and Grief".

¹⁹ Geoffrey Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning (New York: Anchor, 1965), p. 131.

to every death to which he is exposed by the media and still remain sane, or, for that matter, have time to do anything else but emote.

Reaction to the Destruction of Social Immortality

Hans Morgenthau observes that the contemporary American has made monuments testifying to his existence, created families which bear his name, erected tombstones which possess the flavor of eternity, had portraits done of him, written poems, developed theories, composed music, invented machines, and made an infinite number of attempts to insure his social immortality. Despite these elaborate ploys, however, he is denied even this concept of immortality, for he lives in a nuclear age in which potential mass destruction is an established fact. This destruction would not only take his own life, but also all of its visible achievements. Thus, by virtue of his existence in a nuclear age, which deprives him of social immortality, the modern American is further predisposed toward death denial.²⁰

Contributions of Urbanization and Changes in Family Structure

The growth of urban mass society and the changing

²⁰Dumont and Foss, pp. 46-67.

form and functions of the family are social processes important in connection with the changing death customs. In 1900, seven out of ten families lived in non-urban areas; today, eight out of ten families live in urban areas like Los Angeles.²¹ The increase in urbanization finally kills acceptance. In our cities, we are especially alienated from death. We now have little community life, each city family being a cell on its own instead of part of a whole. In 1880, there were yet customary modes of response to death which were generally well enough known to the bereaved. Americans today are somewhat at a loss for knowledge of what is appropriate behavior toward the dead. From one's religious and cultural background a person may draw important clues as to what should be done, and there are legal rules and regulations that must be met; yet with smaller families and fewer deaths in them, one is less likely to have experienced a funeral, and only a minority have taken charge of matters surrounding death. Missing today are the family and friends who washed and laid-out the body, and ordered the coffin from the local carpenter as a simple matter of community duty. Missing today are the friends who carried the coffin and frequently dug the grave and put the body in the ground. Paid pallbearers are not uncommon today. Consequently, the burden of responsibility

²¹Fulton, "Counseling and Grief."

for action taken toward the deceased is shifted to the modern funeral director who is prepared for such action. Bodies do not lie in the homes before burial, but, as a rule, are taken immediately after death to the funeral home. Avoidance of death is seen in the practice of relegating the duties and ceremonies at the time of death to trained and paid individuals.

Contributions of Funeral Directors

Americans take for granted that every person, no matter what the circumstances, has the right to a decent burial. A large determinant in this practice stems from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Decent burial was regarded to be of great importance in ancient Israel, as in the rest of the ancient Near East. It was a disgrace and a calamity to remain unburied, or to be cast out of the tomb (Jeremiah 16:4, 6-8; 22:18f.; 25:33; 8:2). One of the most frequently employed curses found in Mesopotamian texts is: "May the earth not receive your corpse."²² It was regarded as one of the laws of humanity "not to let any one lie unburied" (Josephus, "Contra Ap." 2:29; Philo, "Hypothetica," ed. Mangey 2:629). The treatment of dead bodies reflects the philosophy as to the innate worth and dignity of

²² Delbert Roy Hillers, "Burial in the Bible," Encyclopaedia Judaica (1971) IV, 1515.

humankind. The care we show for the dead is a means we employ to guarantee respect for life.²³

There is an aversion to undertakers and funeral establishments because there is a very distinct aversion to proximity to a lifeless body. When the body is turned over to the mortician, the aversion to the remains is not thereby eradicated; but, it is transferred in some measure to the person who has taken charge of them.²⁴

The funeral director is caught between ambivalent demands. On the one hand, he is encouraged to disguise the reality of death for the survivors who do not possess the emotional support once provided by the community to deal with it; on the other hand, he is impelled to call attention to the special services he is rendering. The blunting occurs in terms of the atmosphere provided for the funeral and the vocabulary which is employed in connection with it. The dead person is referred to as if he were still alive (e.g., "Mr. Smith is in Room 24"), while cards and flowers destined for the funeral are addressed to the deceased.²⁵

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Jackson, p. 18.

²⁴

LeRoy Bowman, The American Funeral (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1959), p. 71.

²⁵

Fulton and Geis, pp. 72-73.

Embalming. At the same time, the funeral director focuses attention upon the body. In colonial America, it became necessary to use whatever preservative methods were available to restrain putrefaction of the corpse while the funeral was delayed. The family plot has always been a common element of cemetery organization in America, and much importance was attached to being gathered with the fathers. The need for adequate methods of preservation was generated to the extent that the desire to be buried "home" called for transportation of the body for increased distances. Funerals were also delayed so that relatives could gather.²⁶ Embalming is so widely practiced in California today that many believe it to be a legal obligation.

Cosmetology. Display of the corpse, of course, forces attention upon death itself; but, in addition to embalming, the embalmer seeks to restore facial skin tones in such a manner that the features appear lifelike (with the help of five different skin shades of "Cosmort Concealer,"²⁷

²⁶Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, The History of American Funeral Directing, (Milwaukee: Bulfin, 1962), pp. 314-316.

²⁷Janice Roberts, "A Guide to Funerals," San Francisco, (June 1974), 70.

"Nature-Glo--the ultimate in cosmetic embalming."²⁸ and "live" make-up powder and rouge). Lips are painted. Cotton stuffed in cheeks erases the glorious wrinkles in the face of the old. A friend of mine died in an accident in which his face was destroyed; much to the horror of those who attended the funeral and to the preclusion of good taste, an open coffin was used. Funeral directors are considered successful when, by virtue of developed skills in cosmetic arts, they are able to take the corpse with its unpleasant appearance and transform it from a lifeless object to the sculptured image of a living human being who is resting in sleep. The facts are relentlessly hidden; the art of cosmetology is an art of complete denial.

Despite the trade's justification, many think that the painted restoration is obscene. As one forty-year-old woman said,

If I have any warning of my death, my body will never pass through the hands of the undertaking profession nor the church. If it should happen to do so, well it doesn't matter. Say, I tried to avoid obscenity. And let it go at that.²⁹

²⁸ Jessica Mitford, The American Way of Death (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 14.

²⁹ Shneidman, p. 75.

Stylish attire. In the past, certain types of clothes were worn by the corpse, a signal to the viewers that the corpse was indeed dead. Traditional death clothing is no longer used; the contemporary corpse is garbed in attire made to give the impression of life. Shrouds have been replaced by hand-made original fashions ranging from stylish suits for men to negligees and cocktail dresses for the ladies. The funeral industry willingly complies with the public's desire to make the corpse appear to be quite alive, rather than to show it as it really is.

Coffins. In the United States, the custom of displaying dead bodies is a costly and elaborate ritual. The national volume of the funeral business is about \$2.2 billion.³⁰ The cost of the average American funeral was some \$350 in 1935;³¹ today it is more than \$1,600.³² Mark

³⁰United Press International dispatch, "The Cost of Dying--Reality or Myth?" Progress-Bulletin (Pomona, CA), (February 18, 1973), p. A-6, cols. 1-2.

³¹Ruth Mulvey Harmer, The High Cost of Dying (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1963), inside front cover.

³²Jack V. Fox, "Neptune Group Provides Sea Funeral Rites," United Press International dispatch, 1974 (?).

Twain puts it neatly when he has an undertaker say:
 "There's one thing in this world which a person don't
 say--'I'll look around a little and if I can't do better
 I'll come back and take it.' That's a coffin."³³

Persons who accept the reality of death, and therefore a cessation of the physical self, should have no concern for physical protection and comfort after death. Our use of coffins, however, is a manifestation of the attitude that death does not really put an end to physical experience. The type of coffin which Americans most often buy is one of the impermeable variety offered by the funeral industry, "solid copper--a quality casket which offers superb value to the client seeking long-lasting protection." Evidently, when Americans say they will die, they really feel that they will take a long nap. Coffin manufacturers can profit heavily from their "revolutionary 'Perfect posture' bed"³⁴ or their "Beautyrama Adjustable Soft-Foam Bed" and "600 Aqua Supreme Cheney Velvet, magnificently quilted"³⁵ or can find great success selling the "Colonial

³³ Ernest Morgan, ed., A Manual of Simple Burial (Burnsville, N C: Celo Press, 1964), p. 12.

³⁴ Dumont and Foss, p. 38.

³⁵ Jonathan Baird, "The Funeral Industry in Boston," in Edwin S. Shneidman (ed.) Death and the College Student, (New York: Behavioral, 1972), p. 69.

Classic beauty--18 gauge lead-coated steel. . . Some are equipped with foam rubber, some with inner spring mattresses."³⁶ Only a major effort of will reminds an observer that the bodies which go into these boxes cannot appreciate them. Our choice of coffins may be viewed as symptomatic of death denial.

It is not safe to say that funeral practices exist in their present forms solely because the American public wishes to deny death. People are getting the kind of funerals they have been persuaded to want. Impermeable coffins and cosmetic embalming generate financial returns to the funeral industry, as well as to serve to justify the existence of such an industry. Scientific methods have been developed in the funeral trade magazines for arrangements in coffin display rooms. A large percentage of the flower industry's profits come from funeral related flower sales. Extension of funeral practices which increase costs and profits may be seen as manifestations of the economic pattern of our culture.

America is greatly over-stocked with funeral establishments. There are some 2,500.³⁷ Business solutions

³⁶ Dumont and Foss, p. 38.

³⁷ United Press International dispatch.

include more lavish funerals thereby furnishing greater profits in each case (this allows the great majority to stay in business).³⁸ Things like metal burial vaults with heavy zinc coating make about as much sense as a fur-lined bathtub, but they help wonderfully in running up the bill!

Graves. Cemeteries have become such big businesses that a cemetery operator selling an acre of plots has a potential profit range of \$14 to 150 million for that single acre.³⁹ All-told, cemeteries enclose about a million acres of land.⁴⁰

On the west coast, the leading super-cemetery is Forest Lawn in Los Angeles. Works of sculpture enhance the value of the grave sites. Roads criss-cross throughout sections with such names as "Immortality," "Dawn of Tomorrow," "Resurrection Slope," "Sunrise Slope," "Slumberland," "Rest Haven," and "Lullabyland."

³⁸ Bowman, pp. 89-91.

³⁹ Dumont and Foss, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Robert Wesley Habenstein and William M. Lamers, Funeral Customs the World Over (Milwaukee; Bulfin, 1960), p. 752.

The realities of the grave tend to be softened by the skills of the funeral director and cemetery personnel. Usually graves are lined with artificial grass to cover the upturned dirt, and the coffin in most cases is not lowered until the bereaved have departed.

Funerals. A nationwide survey of funeral directors reveals that Americans are shifting their attitudes on funerals away from traditional beliefs toward simpler, nonreligious and less expensive funerals. Attendance at funerals is going down. Dr. Robert Fulton thinks this reflects our death-denying culture. Many in metropolitan cities view funerals as a utilitarian necessity--"the funeral has become for some merely a means of disposing of the dead."⁴¹ The "death-denying culture" movement has led to an increase in the number of "disposals," direct burials and cremations without funerals.⁴²

DETOURS AROUND REALITY

We have seen that American society has shunned death, ignored it, repressed it to the level of the pornographic, and if at all possible, would like to

⁴¹American Tract Society, No Funeral, Please, p. 4.

⁴²United Press International dispatch.

eliminate it. One gets the feeling that people are saying, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

Death is all around us--automobile accidents, heart attacks, cancer, suicide, murder, famine, war--but, most Americans have little intimate experience with it. Death is primarily an affliction of the elderly. The general elimination of child mortality and greater control over diseases concentrate death in the ranks of the very old.

In the immediate, direct sense, there is a general absence of experience with death. The American way is not to face it. We isolate and insulate it. The elderly, sick, and dead have been taken out of the home. The place of death has shifted from the bedroom to the battlefield of the intensive care unit. The handling of illness and death are increasingly the responsibility of institutions other than the family.

A heavy silence surrounds death. There is little conscious interest in it. Paul Tillich observes that Americans react to the inescapable end of their lives by looking only into the immediate future, "while cutting off from our awareness the future, "while cutting off from our awareness the future which is farther away, and above all, by cutting off from our consciousness the end, the last moment of our future."⁴³ The very general

⁴³ Paul Tillich, "The Eternal Now," in Herman Feifel (ed.) The Meaning of Death, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 31-32.

evasion of any frank facing of the end seems to be more the rule than the exception.

Because of the avoidance of the sight or thought of death, death becomes an alien, foreign process. We refuse to anticipate it. When death comes, we have not prepared for it. We have not developed rational attitudes toward it nor logical means of dealing with it. Inexperience begets uncertainty and incompetence; and they beget a willingness to let someone else meet the issue. Lack of attention breeds indifference--"I won't know what is going on, nor care what they do with me"; indifference may be a defensive reaction to a deep desire to avoid speaking of the subject.⁴⁴

Families take their cues from morticians who provide elaborate ceremonies which convey the message that death has not really taken place. The illusion of life camouflages death.

We have here a set of attitudes that tremendously feeds the conspiracy of evasion. These factors feed the fantasy that death is nonexistent. We build detours around reality.

⁴⁴ Bowman, pp. 3-4.

CHAPTER 2

PERSPECTIVES ON DYING, DEATH, AND BEYOND

When I began work on this Professional Project, the questions which are dealt with in this chapter were not preconceived. As I explored Christian funerals, I confronted numerous questions: Is mortality a consequence of sin or humanity's natural condition? Should we proclaim the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body? What is our assurance as we face the mystery of death? Why do we fear death? What about the positive values of death? This chapter grows out of my wrestling with these funeral-related questions.

Obviously this list of questions is incomplete. I have sought to include material which would help persons who want to lead meaningful funerals. This is the reason for selecting these particular pressing problems.

DEATH: PUNISHMENT OR NATURAL CONDITION?

Death as Consequence of Sin

Vast numbers of Christian people advocate an understanding of death which emphasizes "certainty." Their hope is expressed through the following theological formulation.

Man was created to have fellowship with God, but because of his stubborn self-will, he chose to go his own

independent way (to sin). As a result of the Fall, fellowship with God is broken, and humanity is separated from God. Humanity fell to mortality. The descendents of Adam inherit the tendency to sin, and the guilt and punishment of Adam's sin. "But God proves His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:3). God has bridged the chasm which separates us from Him by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place (I Peter 3:18). Individuals who, by personal invitation and through faith, receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are promised eternal life (texts cited include, Revelation 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9; John 1:12, 3:16; I John 5:11-13). In this life,

. . . thou art crowned at last.
 With saints enthroned on high,
 Thou dost thy Lord Proclaim, . . .
 O happy, happy soul! In ecstasies praise,
 Long as eternal ages roll, Thou seest thy Savior's face.
 Redeemed from earth and pain. . . .
 (Charles Wesley, "Servant of God, Well Done")¹

Those who do not turn to God, trusting Christ and receiving forgiveness, are divorced from God to Hell where

the envious are immersed in freezing water, . . .
 the angry are dismembered, . . . the slothful are
 thrown into snakepits, . . . the greedy are put
 into cauldrons of boiling oil, . . . the gluttonous
 are forced on toads, rats and snakes, . . . the²
 lustful are smothered in fire and brimstone, . . .

¹Charles Wesley, "Servant of God, Well Done," The Book of Hymns (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1966) p. 288.

²Ernst and Johanna Lehner, Devils, Demons, Death and Damnation (New York: Dover, 1971), pp. 43-48.

Death, within this theological perspective is the punishment and penalty of yielding to the Devil and falling victim to oneself (Genesis 3:3): "sin when it is full-grown brings forth death" (James 1:15b RSV), "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a RSV). Death, the avenger, is something that humanity set loose. It is something humanity brought into its experience.

Raised and trained as a first century Jew, Paul accepted the view that death is the terrible consequences of sin: "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Romans 5:12 RSV). Paul affirms the corporate nature of the historical process. Yet, "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Romans 5:18 RSV).

Some rabbis also held the juristic conception of death as the punishment for sin: "There is no death without sin" (Shabbat 55a), and it is the fate of humanity since no person is sinless,". . .there is not a righteous man on earth, who . . . never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20 RSV). We know only the death of the sinner. The few exceptions, such as the really righteous Elijah, were thought not to have died.³

³ Editorial staff, "Death In Talmud and Midrash," Encyclopaedia Judaica (1971), V, 1424.

Western theologians from Augustine onward taught that humanity had once been in a natural state of perfect fellowship with God, where he had the possibility of not sinning and consequently of not dying. Augustine wrote:

The first men were so created, that if they had not sinned, they would not have experienced any kind of death: but that, having become sinners, they were so punished with death, that whatsoever sprang from their stock should also be punished with⁴ the same death. (City of God, Book 3, Chapter 3).

The Augustinian interpretation of sin and death became the official teaching of the Church in the Middle Ages and is continuing to be taught by orthodox Christianity.⁵

In this thought death is unnatural. The word "punishment" implies something that ought not to be.⁶ Death is a catastrophe, an unintended element of the divine order of creation which has arisen from disorder.

This negative viewpoint sees Christians as "strangers and pilgrims" passing through the evil world. John Calvin wrote, "In comparison with the immortality to come, let us despise this life and long to renounce it" (Institutes, III, ix,4).⁷

⁴Richard W. Doss, The Last Enemy (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 22-23.

⁵Ibid., p. 69.

⁶Josef Pieper, Death and Immortality (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 59-60.

⁷Doss, pp. 22-27.

For the believer, death is a door through which we pass into real life. It is "Graduation Day" (so we should give flowers as at high school graduation, reasons one popular psychologist for the Florists' Telegraph Delivery Association).⁸

Physical death is the liberation of the soul from the body. The body dies and decays and goes back to dust. But the indestructible soul never really dies. The soul--the being that is the real person--"takes the boat home." Then, on a great and awesome day of resurrection, new resurrection bodies will be united with the souls of the departed.

This, then, is a way of understanding death. The future is certain"for the Bible tells me so." The world is full of people who cling with blind passion to this "certainty." Yet for many moderns, this formulation seems incredible. Instead of turning away in dismay, it is important to realize that the rejection of this framework for understanding death and the Christian faith is not concomitant with casting off the Christian faith. This is merely one formulation.

Death as Humanity's Natural Condition

Not everyone agrees that death is an unnatural event.

⁸Glen W. Davidson, "Basic Images of Death in America" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1964), pp. 19-20.

At first it may seem difficult to envision the scandal which we deny and fear as "natural." Yet when we speak of death in general we compare it poetically to the natural autumnal fall of leaves. However, a thing is not necessarily "natural" because it is universal. A thing is "natural" when it is inherent in, fitting and consonant with nature--in this case, the nature of humanity.⁹

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, to be human is to be mortal and to be mortal means that you die. As life is given to us by God, dying and death are also the given nature of human beings. The fact that we are mortal is an essential element in the definition of what it means to be human. If we live as if we are never going to die, that simply distorts life's reality.

According to the Old Testament witnesses death is not something unnatural. It is a factor of God's creation. A human life, arrived at its full maturity, is plucked like a ripe stalk at harvest time (Job 5:26). It is a part of the natural rhythm in the flow of creation.

A Jewish view, stemming from the Tannaitic period, sought to minimize the dread with which death was normally contemplated.¹⁰ These rabbis stressed that death was a perfectly natural part of the fabric of the world since

⁹Pieper, p. 48.

¹⁰A. Cohen, Everyman's Talmud (New York: Dutton 1949), p. 75.

creation. Thus when God had completed the creation of the world He saw that "it was very good" (Genesis 1:31b RSV), and Rabbi Meir remarked that death was even classed among the "very good" things made by the Creator. According to this view sin only hastens death, but does not cause it in the first place.¹¹ On the phrase, "there is . . . a time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 RSV), the Midrash (ad.loc.) makes the remark, "From the moment of birth there is always the possibility of death."¹²

The belief that humanity's natural condition is mortality is shared by all the Semitic peoples. It is expressed, for example, in the declaration of Siduri to Gilgamesh: "When the gods created humanity, they established death for mankind; they kept life in their own hands" (Tablet X,iii, 3-4; ANET 90).¹³

Dutch theologian P. J. van Leeuwen argues that "man as he was created was, and was willed and intended by God to be, a mortal being. We must deny that death is something unnatural, a break in God's creation."¹⁴ From the beginning the ability to die, belonged to the natural constitution of humanity. Richard W. Doss argues,

¹¹Editorial staff, p. 1424.

¹²Cohen, p. 75.

¹³E. Jacob, "Death," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, (1962), I, 803,

¹⁴Doss, p. 69.

We do not die because we must receive punishment for sin, or because we have inherited the penalty or guilt of Adam's sin. We die because we are human beings, ¹⁵ creatures for whom death is the natural end to life.

This is not to say that death is to be generally understood as a friend, or that it is to be looked upon as the liberation of the immortal soul from the limitations of this life. We encounter death as the great destroyer that aggressively destroys everything. We look at death as a foe which ultimately "catches up" with us. Life is precious, death is a catastrophic force. Paul likewise took a grave view of death, as the "last enemy" (I Corinthians 15:26) to be overcome and destroyed: he defiantly and triumphantly exclaimed: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (I Corinthians 15:55 RSV).

IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION?

The New Testament knows of no optimistic view of death as a "friend" which frees the soul from the bonds of the body. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul which commonly passes for the biblical or Christian answer to death is not that at all. It is simply one of the many answers which Christians have given to the question at some time and place. Popular pietists may be horrified to learn that personal immortality is an inappropriate and unbiblical way of understanding death. Claiming to be founded on

¹⁵Ibid., p. 70.

Scripture, it is, as a matter of fact, Greek thought. Plato contributed the idea of immortality of the soul, and somehow it picked up almost biblical credibility. Yet it is not biblical. No biblical text authorizes the statement that the "soul" is separated from the body at the moment of death. Indeed, the term "immortality" occurs in only two places in the New Testament: once about God "who alone has immortality" (I Timothy 6:16a RSV), and once where Paul speaks of how the mortal nature must put on immortality (I Corinthians 15:53ff). Those who think the Bible is interested in the immortality of the soul have read it into the material.

For most of its history, Christian theology has tended to assimilate the Platonic doctrine with certain modifications. It entered Christian thought in the second and third centuries, found a full-blown exposition in the writings of Augustine,¹⁶ was even declared as dogma by the Lateran Council of 1512, and from Calvin onwards it was assumed in post-Reformation Protestantism to be a part of Christian doctrine.¹⁷ Much of our distrust of the body, our puritanical attitudes, and our talk of "saving souls" springs from this source.

According to the Greek view, man is thought of

¹⁶Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁷Emil Brunner, Eternal Hope (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 100.

dualistically: a perishable body which imprisons an immortal soul. The physical body is not part of the true self, but is a prison for the real being. The soul by its nature cannot die, "just as snow cannot be warm, nor fire cold" (Socrates).¹⁸ When the body dies and returns to earth, the soul is freed from its prison and "flutters away".¹⁹ This dualism is explicit in the following Greek sepulchral inscriptions:

As for this (the body) a little dust which has been shed over it conceals it, but the wide sky keeps the soul which has escaped from the limbs (Athens, Roman period);²⁰

Earth keeps the body and bones of the sweet boy, but his soul has gone to the house of the blessed (Athen, possibly fourth century B. C.).²¹

Christian inscriptions also made use of the dualistic interpretation:

Earth hides the body here, but the soul has flown into the air and is among those it knew before, receiving this reward for honest character (Athens, fourth or fifth century);

Zosimianus, fostered of God, your weeping wife laid the shell (of your body) in the bosom of its mother, earth, and she uttered sounds full of mourning from her soft lips. But your soul went straightway up into heaven, rejoicing to announce your love to God your father, telling how you loved all and were beloved of

¹⁸ Helmut Thielicke, Death and Life (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 21.

¹⁹ Richmond Lattimore, Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1942), p. 29.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

²¹ Ibid., p. 33.

all in turn (Ceos, fifth century or later).²²

Thus, as Oscar Cullmann points out,²³ Socrates was able to face death as a friend, because for him death meant freedom. According to Plato in the Phaedo, Socrates comforted and assured his friends and calmly drained "his cup with no difficulty or distaste whatsoever." Jesus, by contrast, agonized: "I have a baptism (=death) to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over!" (Luke 12:50 TEV). In the Garden of Gethsemane he was "greatly distressed and troubled" and said to his disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mark 14:33-34 RSV) "He offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death" (Hebrews 5:7 RSV). He pled, "Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:36 RSV). And his cry from the cross--"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34 RSV)--indicates that death meant not life for his immortal soul, not liberation, not a friend. Death for him was an enemy, which he overcame.

In biblical anthropology--and the view of humanity in the behavioral sciences--the human being is a psycho-physical unity, not a combination of two entities, much less

²²Ibid., pp. 304-305

²³Oscar Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body" in Krister Stendahl (ed.) Immortality and Resurrection (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 9-53.

of three. In contrast to the Greek view, Rudolf Bultmann wrote,

. . . Paul did not dualistically distinguish between man's self (his 'soul') and his bodily soma as if the latter were an inappropriate shell, a prison, to the former; nor does his hope expect a release of the self from its bodily prison but expects instead the 'bodily' resurrection--or rather the transformation of the soma from under the power of flesh into a spiritual soma, i.e., a spirit-ruled soma.²⁴

Paul nowhere states that the "soul" (psyche) is the higher, divine, immortal personality. His controlling way of thinking was Hebrew, with the "soul" being the person in his manner of life, sentiments, and disposition (Philippians 1:27; 2:2,19; I Thessalonians 2:8). Paul never regards the body as just one part of the person, as is done in the Platonic formula, or as did the "enthusiasts" at Corinth. The body is not evil--it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19). The soma is not something that clings to a person's real self (to his "soul"), but belongs to its very essence. The Hebrew thinker could not imagine life without a body. (Have you ever tried to imagine a person without a body?) So we can say a person does not have a soma and a psyche; he is soma and psyche. A human being is a whole being.

Just as it is the whole person who is the living creature, so it is the whole person who dies. To die is

²⁴Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 201.

"to be no more" (Psalm 39:13: Job 7:21). We may sing,
²⁵
 "Breathe on me, Breath of God, So shall I never die",
 but death is real. Dying is complete. We die, every last
 bit of us. Yet God gave us life and He can do it again; this
 awesomely powerful enemy is conquered by the miracle of
 resurrection. The biblical and I would say Christian
 way to think of the other side of death is in terms of
 resurrection.

The myth of immortality trifles death away as insignificant. We then know that nothing can happen to our immortal soul, our essential being, in death. This doctrine is a denial of death's reality. The mere word "Immortality" promotes the misconception that the person does not really die at all. A human, then, is immortal, deathless, because it is only a certain something in him, only his body, that is mortal. Those who adhere to this doctrine say "Death has no power over the deeper side of the person. It is just the threshold to the 'world-to-come' through which the soul passes as if it were changing houses." We are refusing to face up to the reality of death if we think that we stop living here and simply move over yonder to continue our lives. If the life of the soul continues, then death, however bitter, is deprived of its

²⁵Edin Hatch, "Breath on Me, Breath of God," The Book of Hymns, p. 133.

power. To say "A person who has died is dead, although his soul lives on" is absurd. The sort of death that occurs to one as he passes from this world to the next is not a real death; it might be called an event, but it is confusing to call such an event death.

It is better to talk about resurrection than about immortality of the soul. The latter was founded on the conviction that man's innermost essence is a divine, and thus undying, principle. The teaching of resurrection avows that man's confidence is in the gracious and merciful God and not in the conviction that man possesses a soul which is incapable of passing out of existence. Immortality is not a quality of the creature's being, but of the Creator's. Our hope rests not in our own inherently divine nature but in our Creator who is the Lord of life and the Lord of death: "What God does, rather than what man is",²⁶ is the basis of the Christian hope. I am not immortal, but I await my own resurrection. This is the belief that by God's power and love we are given new life beyond death. By a creative act of God, we are made nothing less than new creations--the old reality is transformed. "This perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality" (I Corinthians 15:53 RSV). Other antitheses Paul uses in talking about the "otherness" of resurrection include dishonor-glory and physical-spiritual

²⁶Gordon D. Kaufman, Systematic Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 466.

(I Corinthians 15:43-44).

What is open to resurrection is not a disembodied soul that has sloughed off its body, but the whole person. Neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer speaks or could speak of the "resurrection or resuscitation of the flesh (sarx)," but he does speak of the total "resurrection of the whole (soma)".²⁷ To speak of "resurrection" rather than "Immortality" ensures that a full existence is meant.

The symbol "resurrection of the body" appears, at first sight, to be incredible to the contemporary mind (Possibly for the very reason that some believe in the immortality of the soul). Yet "rebirth" need be no more miraculous than "birth." Even though we cannot imagine the "resurrection," "this symbol is an appropriate expression of the Christian hope for the individual."²⁸ Unless the records utterly misrepresent him, Jesus shared this expectation. This symbol is the Church's answer to death. The old passes away and the new comes. This means total dependence on God's act. The ultimate future is beyond all human power and understanding; yet, it will bring the proper fulfillment for the "whole person."

²⁷Statement by Eric Lane Titus in course BS252 The Religion of Paul, at The School of Theology at Claremont, Spring, 1975.

²⁸Kaufman, p. 471.

ASSURANCE

Death raises questions about the future: What is the nature of those who have died? What lies ahead for us? These are the human questions. Some religious groups can tell you exactly the way it is. They describe with dogmatic exactitude what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell."²⁹ The Church has groups that use (or, abuse) the Bible as a prophetic blueprint for understanding the secrets of the future. Hal Lindsay's multi-million seller The Late Great Planet Earth promises to pierce through the future and rob it of mystery. Multitudes of theological crack-pots design the future to fit their own images--their beliefs resembling tourists' guidebooks. Speculation about the hereafter has been rife throughout history.

Roger Shinn submits that "Literal answers to questions about life after death are mostly foolish."³⁰ We would do well to follow Harry Emerson Fosdick's admonitions: "Whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life, whipping off finalities as though he

²⁹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Faith and Immortality," in his What Is Vital In Religion (New York: Harper & Brothers; 1955), p. 223.

³⁰ Roger Shinn, Life, Death, and Destiny (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 82.

could settle it, distrust that man";³¹ "Waste no time on charlatans who think they can!"³²

Death confronts us with mystery that we are unable to solve. Although many make the irritating claim to know more about the future than others, none of us know what is to come after this life. Fosdick explains, "We are like unborn babes in a mother's womb. What faces them is not death but birth; yet it is birth into a world not a single detail of which could they possibly imagine."³³ Some people want reunion with those they have lost. Well, who knows? The Revelation of John declares a future age radically different from the present--dimensions far beyond our power to imagine. It points to a future so glorious that what we may envision by reunion seems pale in comparison. Some say they have communicated with their "dead" loved ones. Have they really? Who knows? I do not. With Laura Nyro I sing, "I'll never know by living, only my dying will tell" ("And When I Die").

Leander E. Keck points out: "What Jesus refused to say about death and life afterward is an important

³¹Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Mystery of Life," in his The Secret of Victorious Living (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), p. 131.

³²Fosdick, "Faith and Immortality," p. 237.

³³Ibid., p. 230.

dimension of his understanding of man. Perhaps nothing he said is more important than what he refused to say."³⁴ One can almost recognize the great mind by their abstaining from the claim to gnosis about what the nature of the future will be. Even the sacred book of Christendom, the Bible, is relatively silent about the "not yet." But, precisely, this very silence is a tribute to the "mysterium tremendum" (Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy).

This acknowledgment of mystery horrifies some people who are accustomed to telling more than they know. They cry: "This is not the Bible; give us the Bible!" Yet in biblical references to the future there is always an economy of detail. By God's

great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for (us), who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (I Peter 1:3b-5 RSV).

That is the Bible: the "inheritance" is being "kept in heaven," and the "salvation" is yet "to be revealed." For all the certainty of the "living hope," there is no sharp analysis of the future. Paul, who uses the word "hope" some forty times in his letters,³⁵ says, "At present we only

³⁴Leander E. Keck, "New Testament Views of Death," in Liston O. Mills (ed.) Perspectives on Death (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 43.

³⁵John Knox, Christ and The Hope of Glory (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 50.

see the baffling reflections in a mirror" (I Corinthians 13:12 Moffatt). That is the Bible. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (I Corinthians 2:9 RSV). That is the Bible. Even the Revelation to John offers few detailed references to what lies beyond.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote:

I know not what the future hath
Of Marvel or surprise
Assured alone that life and death
God's mercy underlies.³⁶

I do not know what will happen. The possibilities are endless. I can accept Russell Aldwinckle's statement, "We can be content to be agnostic about details."³⁷ But I cannot affirm the deathbed shrug of Rabelais, "I am going away to the Great Perhaps."³⁸

Our expression of hope "is indeed a completely empty one unless we can form some rough conception of what the 'other world' might be like."³⁹ And, I feel an immense curiosity. The New Testament is not altogether silent. Paul speaks of "being with Christ" (I Thessalonians 4:17; 4:10; Philippians 1:23; II Corinthians 5:7f).

³⁶John Greenleaf Whittier, "I Know Not What the Future Hath," The Book of Hymns, p. 290.

³⁷Russell Aldwinckle, Death in the Secular City (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 100.

³⁸David W. Berg and George G. Daugherty (eds.) The Individual, Society and Death (1972), p. 44.

³⁹Aldwinckle, p. 97.

"Walking by sight" (II Corinthians 5:7) will replace "walking by faith." We shall see "face to face" him whom we now see only as a mirrored image full of riddles. In speaking of the future age Paul says, ". . . Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (I Corinthians 13:12 RSV). "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2 RSV). These traditional phrases speak of our hope which is by definition indefinable. We use terms from our everyday experience to describe an essentially ineffable experience.

Having a sense of some form of existence after death somehow feels "right."

One 'scientifically disposed colleague' wrote to William Ernest Hocking when his wife died: "Since her death I have had a very simple faith that somehow her existence is not closed. There is a 'more' and she inhabits it: this seems to me too certain to be shaken by pure reason. . . . I have felt too deeply to be discouraged any longer by mere logic."⁴⁰

The Christian faith urges that we be open to the future, for this means being open to God. The proper and adequate future for our existence is known only by God, and to him it can be entrusted. We cannot tie him down to our specifications. If as a precondition of your believing in the good God you insist that you must get an explanation

⁴⁰Marjorie Casebier McCoy, To Die With Style! (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 143.

that will answer all questions and solve all problems, you might as well forget it, for there is no such explanation that little minds like ours can grasp--let us be thankful for that! Our future is beyond all human knowledge, experience, and power.

Gordon D. Kaufman explains that the human unwillingness fully to trust God unless we know what He will do with us is a manifestation of unfaith.⁴¹ The Christian posture combines the confession of ignorance with the declaration of faith.⁴² It does not consider it necessary that one should know what the future will be like. Our final resource is not the explanation that is clear to us but the God of unconditional self-giving love who is real to us. Death strikes one who is loved.

The Christian's belief that he will "be" in some real sense after death is based on his faith in the power of God. Kaufman submits that to have faith in God is to give one's "eternal destiny" over into his hands, to do with however He sees fit.⁴³ "If we live, we live unto the Lord; if we die, we die unto the Lord, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Thus the only way we can die is to die into his

⁴¹Kaufman, pp. 469-470.

⁴²Davidson, pp. 224-225.

⁴³Kaufman, p. 469.

hands.⁴⁴ We are in faithful hands, a bank that will not break. And so we can sing with Joseph H. Gilmore:

He leadeth me: O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.⁴⁵

Our security in the present moment and our assurance about the future are grounded in "God's love . . . poured into our hearts." He will not disappoint us (Romans 5:5). On his deathbed John Wesley exclaimed: "The best of all is, God is with us!"

The rapture of the Christian faith finds its supreme expression in Paul's words"

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will He not also freely (graciously) give us all things with him? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31b-32, 35, 37-39).

That is all I need to know. It is light enough to live by. It is the tremendous assurance of the triumphant love of God in Christ, from which no power--"nothing whether we live or die"--can ever separate us. Cf. Psalms 16: 17:15; 49:15; 73:23-26; Job 19:26. No adversary which

⁴⁴Thielicke, p. 202.

⁴⁵Joseph H. Gilmore, "He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought," The Book of Hymns, p. 217.

⁴⁶Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, The Story of Methodism (Nashville: Methodist Book Concern, 1926), p.206.

now exists or will exist is successfully against us when God is for us. Cf. Psalm 118:6. In the Cross God displays such love that we can "trust he will care for one as he ought to be cared for."⁴⁷ Even the forces which we admit to be mighty are powerless to cut us off from him whose "steadfast love endures for ever" (Psalm 136 RSV). We not only are not losers, we are abundant gainers.⁴⁸ The adversaries are wholly overthrown and we come off as "more conquerors through him who loved us." God maintains his Lordship over death--the death of those we love and my own death. Glen W. Davidson declares: "to know that dying need not cut us off from the Love which has made life worthwhile is the most comforting reassurance I can imagine."⁴⁹

Faith can revolutionize the way we look at the future and free us to confront dying and death openly, honestly and realistically. Our glorious hope in Christ is not that we shall not really die, but that the Author of resurrection faith will not leave us in death, that He will call us anew, beyond the suffering of dying, and grant the

⁴⁷Kaufman, p. 469.

⁴⁸John Wesley, Notes on Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1962), p. 48.

⁴⁹Glen W. Davidson, Living with Dying (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), p. 96.

fullness of new life.⁵⁰

Death is not the last word. No life is forgotten. "God will not break faith . . . in the fellowship he has established, nor will he let it be annulled by death."⁵¹ The "last enemy" is conquered.

THE FEAR OF DEATH

If death is a part of the rhythms of nature, why should we be frightened? Marcus Aurelius recommends "waiting for death with a cheerful mind." He assumes that people should not fear that which is natural. "Why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements?"⁵² Why so?

The Fear of Separation

A young woman, who overrode her mother's wishes and had her father exhumed from his grave and frozen after two days in the ground, explains, "You can see the person any time you want to. Skin tone is perfectly natural. Eyebrows, eyelashes--there he is. You can go back and visit when you want to, say 'Hi' . . . I guess, in a sense, when you freeze someone, you do, in a way, avoid the absolute cutting off that death would normally mean because you're not really cut off completely from the person."⁵³

⁵⁰Knox, pp. 57-58.

⁵¹Thielicke, pp. 198-199.

⁵²Roy Branson, "Is Acceptance A Denial of Death? Another Look at Kubler-Ross," Christian Century, XCII (May 7, 1975), 466.

⁵³David Hendin, Death as a Fact of Life (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 201-202.

We fear death because it means separation--separation from persons we love, from a part of our self-identity, and from experiences we treasure. As one young woman said, "When I get my exit cue, I won't go willingly. I don't want to leave my earth, my sky, my family."⁵⁴ This specific fear is probably the most common reason for fearing death. There are several reasons why separation is threatening to us.

As human beings we know life in and through relationships with other persons. Death ends relationships. It divides husband and wife, mother and child. It separates you from everyone. Richard Doss explains, "We do not want to terminate relationships in which the very vitality of life itself has been experienced."⁵⁵ The whole self-image of an individual is under risk when he is faced with separation.

We fear death because it eliminates our opportunities to care for our dependents. We fear what will become of them. "I don't want to leave those I love." Accompanying this fear of separation from loved ones is the popular belief in reunion after death.

William May reminds us, "Death means the unraveling of human community."⁵⁶ People strongly desire to "belong,"

⁵⁴Edwin S. Shneidman, "You and Death," Psychology Today (June 1971), 75.

⁵⁵Doss, p. 64.

⁵⁶William May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," in Mills, p. 180.

but death tears one away. There is the terror of being forgotten or replaced. Time comes when my belongings get distributed, my business gets a new partner, my Church gets a new deacon, my positions go to people I do not even know --a time when my family can no longer speak to me, only about me. Finally, no one remembers me.

Death not only threatens a person with separation from community; it threatens him with separation from the flesh--from that in and through which we know life.

In addition to fearing the loss of relationships and the loss of flesh, our fear of death derives from our apprehension concerning the loss of experiences we enjoy.

O death, how bitter is the reminder of you to one who lives at peace among his possessions, to a man without distractions, who is prosperous in everything, and who still has the vigor to enjoy his food!
(Sirach 41:1).

We fear separation from the continuing flow of the existent world. We fear no longer having any experiences. Americans tend to feel guilty and anxious when inactive, and since death is often associated with inactivity, it is feared.

Death is feared as the great interrupter. It disrupts and comes as that event which ends opportunities to pursue goals and to finish business important to us and our self-esteem. All my plans and projects come to an end. Indeed, those who have attained most of their

goals fear death the least.⁵⁷

The Fear of Dying

Many people would agree with Montaigne: "It is not death I fear but dying."⁵⁸ They fear the actual process of dying more than being dead, for dying may be accompanied by pain, destruction of an attractive physical appearance, abandonment and isolation, and helplessness and dependency on others.

The dying process might be prolonged and terribly painful, a lingering deterioration--when I cough and choke and gasp for breath. Dying is seen as the last painful "struggle." We prefer to die "quickly, with no suffering, in one's bed, at home, sleeping at night."⁵⁹ Yet few enjoy good health to "a good old age" (Genesis 15:15; 25:8) and die in their sleep (Once in a hundred thousand cases say the statisticians).⁶⁰

People seem to dread suffering the indignities of a failing body. This fear about the process of dying is the fear of the loss of appeal. Dying is often a stinking, ugly, horrible thing. Diseases disfigure. When

⁵⁷Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, The American View of Death (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1972), p. 20

⁵⁸Ignace Lepp, Death and Its Mysteries (New York: MacMillan, 1958) p. 31.

⁵⁹Herman Feifel, "Death," The Encyclopedia of Mental Health (1963), II, 433.

⁶⁰Pieper, p. 28.

we are attached to machines that pump and drain and measure, we just do not look our best. And we fear that our condition will make us so unacceptable to those around us that we will be abandoned.⁶¹

One of the deepest fears of dying is the fear of abandonment. Social isolation can be associated with punishment, and those who fear social isolation dread death. "I do not want to be isolated from my family in a lonely, impersonal hospital." It has been found that individuals living in homes for the aged, or with relatives, have a less fearful concept of their deaths than those who live in solitude.⁶² We fear the aloneness of dying and death. Yet, there is an increasing tendency to segregate the elderly and isolate the dying. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross explains that genuinely religious people have an easier time of dying because their faith gives them an assurance that they are never alone and abandoned.⁶³

People seem to fear also the expected loss of control that death implies. We put a high value on being in control of our own existence.

⁶¹Davidson, Living with Dying, p. 23.

⁶²Wendall M. Swenson, "Attitudes toward Death Among the Aged," in Robert Fulton (ed.) Death and Identity (New York: Wiley, 1965). p. 110.

⁶³Sam Keen, "Ideas For Living: No.15/An Interview with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross," Family Circle, (September 1975), 51.

When you are dying, . . . there is an incredible vulnerability--and that's scary. It is almost as if one's last few minutes of life involve a vulnerability akin to one's first few minutes of life. Losing control over a body and environment which were at one time your servants must be a frightening experience.⁶⁴

We fear having others take care of our personal needs.

We fear the helplessness of dying.

Kübler-Ross writes:

When a patient is severely ill, he is often treated like a person with no right to an opinion. It is often someone else who makes the decision if and when and where a patient should be hospitalized. It would take so little to remember that the sick person too has feelings, has wishes and opinions, and has--most important of all--the right to be heard.⁶⁵

Those who have a sense of omnipotence fear death for it faces them with the awareness of their finiteness. Death is a threat to their sense of ultimate supremacy and mastery.

We also despise inflicting a burden on those we love. The dying patient in a hospital is a tremendous emotional and financial burden. I dread a lingering death--when I lose sanity and never smile and cannot say "thanks"--being that drain on others.

Although a sudden death spares the suffering, it too is dreaded. And premature deaths, those who are taken "in the noontide of my days" (Isaiah 38:10) or "before his

⁶⁴Robert E. Neale, The Art of Dying (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 34.

⁶⁵Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), pp. 7-8.

time" (Ecclesiastes 7:17), are looked upon as misfortune. Oh, some may say, "Perhaps he was favored--perhaps he was called to add a spot of beauty--a needed flower in the Heavenly gardens--a blossom that will grow in greater beauty there. He has missed the struggles and torments of this life and has gained, early, the greater joys of the great Eternal Beyond." But, more would agree with the epitaph of a late Athenian Stoic which concludes: "But he who lies here is too young," and the 8 A.D. epitaph for a girl bitten by a scorpion: "Alas for those who go underground when they do not deserve it,"⁶⁶ and the third century Galatian epitaph: "(Death) snatched away the finest flower of your lovely youth."⁶⁷ Death does not fight fair. A tyrant, it takes away little boys from their mothers. It rapes little girls in or before the flower of life.

But sometimes, especially during intense suffering or loneliness, we do not feel so afraid; we think death may not be so bad after all. "O death, how welcome is your sentence to one who is in need and is failing in strength, very old and distracted over everything; to one who is contrary, and has lost his patience!" (Sirach 41:2).⁶⁸

⁶⁶Lattimore, p. 183.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 195.

⁶⁸Fred D. Gealy, "The Biblical Understanding of Death," Pastoral Psychology, XIV (June 1963), 35.

Many are relieved to die, and are glad there is no "infinity of the finite" (Tillich's suggestion as a possible symbol for Hell).⁶⁹ Some who know life only as oppression pray to die. They feel their lives are even more painful than death. Some request euthanasia or attempt to take their lives. They are very glad it is all over.

The Fear of the Other Side of Death

Another category of fears deals with the fears of what follows death. This includes the fear of what will be done to your body. A disintegrating body is not a pretty picture--thus, our funeral and burial practices to "protect" the body.

Another fear relating to what happens after death is the uncertainty about what might happen if there is life after death; fear of punishment, fear about being roasted in some other-worldly Hell. Of course, this uncertainty of the outcome of judgment has a long history. Another anticipatory fear is loss of identity, the anticipation of non-being.

Ultimately, death remains a mystery to us. It is separation from all that is familiar. It is perhaps the most "Unknown of the unknowns,"⁷⁰ for no one has ever really died and lived to tell about it. We fear what we

⁶⁹Kaufman, p. 470.

⁷⁰Dumont and Foss, p. 20.

do not and feel we cannot understand. Like children who are afraid of the dark, we cannot focus on the unexperienced and explain its strangeness, the mystery that is so central in biblical thought. Facing the unpredictable makes death frightening, and makes us "bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of."⁷¹

The Power of Fear

Like eleven-foot thick walls in the Tower of London, these fears can imprison us. They can paralyze action, even lead us to abhor life. As we waste energy trying to avoid the inevitable, we live in bondage. Yet much of the fear that the inevitability of death arouses is valuable for normal functioning. The repressed fear of death serves as a powerful stimulus for self-preservation, an effort against disintegration. Thus fear functions as an ever-present drive to maintain life and to overcome storms, diseases, wars, accidents and other threats to life.

To fear death is natural, and should never be trivialized as immaturity, instability, or lack of faith. It is all right to be bothered about death. The Church ought to help us bother with it because it is bothersome. The Church ought to be a great botherer. Let's bother

⁷¹Robert H. Hamill, "What Shall I Do With My Death?" United Methodists Today I, (August 1974), 20.

with things that bother people.

VALUES OF NUMBERING OUR DAYS

"Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away. . . ." ⁷² What does it all mean? The Bible is very concerned with time. In it we read of God's ownership of all, including time. Every day is God's day. Each new day is a day which the Lord has made. God is the owner. Man is the steward, Time is a gift that God gives us--a perishable gift, a gift that does not keep. It is the most valuable thing a person can spend. Yet we often drift along, allowing time to be spent for us, squandering our precious asset.

When I was a child I thought time stretched ahead of me forever. A summer was a long time. A year seemed like ages of ages . . . from one birthday to the next. I thought my parents must have lived practically an eternity--I had, almost, at the age of ten. But it is different now. At the age of twenty-five, I still feel as though I have a lot of time ahead of me, but recently I was shocked to see a commercial on television for a record album of "Oldies But Goodies" and the songs they called "Oldies But Goodies" were from my youth!

The human species is the only living being on our

⁷²Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," The Book of Hymns, p. 28.

earth which knows it will die. Only man has an actual death-awareness. Only man can say, "I will die."

William E. Hocking argues that acceptance of one's death is a crucial part of the maturation process. Human maturity "brings along with it a recognition of limit, which is a notable advance of self knowledge."⁷³ Death, more than anything else, brings before us the radical finitude of our existence. The mature person recognizes that his or her life has boundaries, it has limits, it has an alpha and an omega. Recognizing that our lives have boundaries could be one of the most revelatory events of a person's life. Numbering our days and recognizing how few they are can help us to spend them as we should (Psalm 90:2).

This is not morbid or gloomy or unwholesome, as some would have us believe; it is healthy realism and honesty. It is unhealthy to behave as though we were going to live forever, for when you live as if there was endless time it becomes too easy to postpone those things that must be done. Our values become skewed. Our priorities get mixed up. We lose any sense of urgency in ordering our days. Rather than saying no to what is unimportant, we fritter away the precious gift of life on trivia, missing out on the things which really matter. Much of the boredom, the empty living, the weariness

⁷³Dumont & Foss, p. 59.

and dissatisfaction with life in our culture stems from the refusal to accept oneself as a finite creature confined to a brief span of time.

In the rest of this short section, let me suggest five reasons why admitting that our days are few can enrich and give meaning to those days. In the first place, realizing that my days are limited, I get my values into perspective and sort out my priorities. I am prompted to reevaluate seriously and immediately my life, and make some basic decisions--crucial choices about what is really important in my life, the things that make life really worth living, and what is not. The awareness of ultimate death can make me impatient with trivia, including many of my commonplace dishonesties and evasions.

The buck stops with each one of us. The decisions are not made for me. They are made by me. That is the meaning of stewardship. I am forced to confront the elemental questions: What shall I do with my life? How and for what should I risk my life? The promise of death moves me to take charge of my life, to reach out to others, to grow, to become all I was meant to be.

All of us need to take a fresh look at our values and priorities. We have choices to make. Remember Edward Bear, coming downstairs, now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of head behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs; but sometimes

he feels that there is really another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. I need to take a little time--or a lot of time--to examine my life. With the multitude of things and places and people and parties and this and that and the other, crowded upon me, it is my Christian privilege and duty to sit down and count the cost for each day. Knowing that my time is limited encourages me to put those truly important things of life at the top of my list of priorities, and I find that very good.

In the second place, when I realize and admit the inevitability of death, I am led to view life as a whole. Peter Koestenbaum puts it this way: "Life becomes a project with a point of termination."⁷⁴ John Macquarrie explains:

Death exposes the superficiality and triviality of many of the ambitions and aspirations on which men spend their energies. What Heidegger calls "everyday" existence is frequently the escape from responsibility, the covering up of death and finitude, the jumping from one immediate concern to the next without any thought that our existence, as bounded, has the potentiality for some measure of unity and wholeness.⁷⁵

Death supplies the perspective in an individual existence,

⁷⁴Peter Koestenbaum, "The Vitality of Death," in Frances G. Scott and Ruth M. Brewer (eds) Confrontations of Death (Corvallis, OR:Continuing Education, 1971) p. 37.

⁷⁵John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 69.

and would seem to be essential to a realization of unified, responsible selfhood. And, I find that very good.

In the third place, numbering my days rubs my nose into the fact that I have neglected the One and only enduring reality, God. I have neglected God and cherished the perishable. My preoccupation with accumulating privileges, prestige, and power is exposed. A top priority for many of us is to join "the great American pleasure-hunt," making mountains of money and heaping up possessions. We barter much of our time for silly trinkets simply for the sake of having them. Helmut Thielicke reminds us that the boundary line of death is "the limit of the deceptive jurisdiction of our gods."⁷⁶

Once there was a family that kept piling up possessions. They held a meeting and said, "What shall we do? We don't have room enough to get the car in the garage." Then they said to themselves: "Here's what we'll do: We'll convert the garage into a large storage room, and then build on another garage." And they said to each other: "We've got enough stuff stashed away to do us a long time. Recline, dine, wine, and shine!" But then God said to them, "You Fools. This very night you must surrender your lives. You have made your money. Who will get it now?" Compare Luke 12:15-21. "You Fools"--that was God's epitaph over that family. We would have

⁷⁶Thielicke, pp. 132-136.

said: "Here lies so-and-so, a good family," and so forth. Yet, what will it profit a person if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? (Matthew 16:26). How pitiful is the person who hoards possessions for himself, and is a pauper in his relation to God and his fellow man (Compare Luke 12:21). Numbering my days helps me to put first things first. Heeding the brevity of life helps me to focus on seeking the kingdom of God, on making a life instead of merely making a living--and I find that very good.

In the fourth place, numbering my days intensifies my living, and I find that very good. Once a person has gotten ride of any "immortality complex" and has a better under-standing of his own finiteness, he can enjoy his days and minutes more. Once he can see through his created illusion, he is free to come to grips with what it means to be human. The meaning of living can take on the characteristics of new life. Kübler-Ross observes: "Life is richest when we realize we are all snowflakes. Each of us is absolutely beautiful and unique. And we are here for a very short time."⁷⁷ James P. Carse illustrates:

When one discovers that he is standing on the edge of a precipice he immediately becomes much more attentive to the ground under his feet. If, on the other hand, the ground extends unbroken and level before our gaze, we are oblivious to its composition and character. We can pass through a wood under the languorous spell of its shifting patterns of light without taking

⁷⁷Keen, p. 44.

notice of its unnumbered specificities, but search for a lost child in that same wood and it will appear in extraordinary detail. . . . If we pass through life never sensitive to what can be lost in it, and forgetful of the precipice that lies at an unknown distance before us, we will see it only in the vaguest generalities.⁷⁸

Once I have squarely faced the undeniable reality of my own death, every flower, every friend, every letter, every song strikes with double impact. Once I know that my days are limited, I cease taking for granted the dear gift of each precious new day. I live deep, letting nature sink in through every pore, spending more time with those I love. Abandoning pretense, I am free to accept all life's splendid transcendent wonders: bread, laughter, a cool August breeze, a December bed, work, a cause that commands, a caring in marriage, the hoping in children--token of God's grace. Richie Cope, given a second life through a heart transplant, observes:

I smell the grass when I cut it. . . . I hear the song of a bird. I watch a cloud go by, hear the cry of a gull and watch the waves, and nobody can set a price on that. I never saw them until life was about to be snatched away and it was given back to me. My life was a flat plane before. Now it's three-dimensional.⁷⁹

Letting life pass before I notice it would be the worst waste of time of all. Numbering my days sharpens my hunger for significant life, rich and full in value. It

⁷⁸James P. Carse, "Reflections on Death as Fact," Drew Gateway, XLIII (Winter 1973), 118.

⁷⁹McCoy, p. 164.

intensifies my living.

Finally, numbering my days encourages me to live life now, to appreciate the present--and I find that very good. In Gulliver's Travels we see those who are granted immortality at birth. As a consequence they lose their incentive for living. When I accept the fact that death is a present possibility in my life, I am freed for truly authentic living in the here and now. I cannot replay yesterday. I want to live now, to use my time. I do not want to get into the stupid habit of living solely for a tomorrow which never comes. I do not want to lose today amid the worries of tomorrow. Now is the time for living.

Letting the last day of my life reflect backwards over all my days gives it urgency that it would otherwise lack. Every decision takes on new urgency. I abandon indecision.. I quickly sort out that which is of little importance. One widow said: "Now I'm sorry that I got so involved in daily problems that I put off the enjoyable things until it was too late."⁸⁰ Not knowing when my time on this earth will be over, I do not frivolously use the limited time that is mine to spend. I do not wait till tomorrow to do what I mean to do. I do not postpone doing

⁸⁰Elain Colonnelli, "State of Total Shock Follows Husband's Death", Register (Santa Ana, CA), (March 7, 1973), Sec. B, p. 2, col. 5.

"the things I always wanted to do." I learn to live my life rather than simply pass through it.

In Journey to Ixtlan, the shaman Don Juan admonishes Carlos Casteneda:

You're not using death as your adviser. I wanted to convince you that you must learn to make every act count since you are going to be here only a short while. . . . Focus your attention on the link between you and your death, without remorse or sadness or worry. Focus your attention on the fact you don't have time and let your acts flow accordingly. . . . Only under those conditions will your acts have their rightful power.⁸¹

Time is mine, now. Time to work, to witness, to confess, to console, to right wrongs, to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to visit the sick, to show kindness, to give help, to do good. I want to use today while I may, to live every moment of it. The years of my life, the days of my years, the hours of my days--they are all mine, mine to fill to the brim, mine to use instead of letting them use me.

NOW IS THE TIME FOR LIVING!

⁸¹Quoted by Joseph F. Massey in a sermon ("Death: A Signpost to Life") at Memorial Church, Stanford University, July 28, 1974, p. 3. (Mimeographed.)

CHAPTER 3

COMING TO TERMS WITH DEATH: GRIEF WORK

Not all of us have had the experience of losing a job. Not all of us have had the experience of retirement. Not all of us have had the experience of divorce. Not all of us have had the experience of moving from one community to another. Not all of us have had the experience of the amputation of a limb. But all of us have the shattering experience of facing the death of a loved one. It is one of the most painful and yet universal facts of our human experience. All of us share the common task of working through the experience of grief.

In a success-oriented society like America, any time a person loses something he wants, he grieves. Vernon R. Wiehe, director of social services at Lutheran Family and Children's Services, St. Louis, Missouri, defines "grief" as "a normal working-through process of a loss an individual has experienced and the process whereby the individual can reinvest energies into new tasks and relationships."¹ Grief is the normal emotional and behavioral response when a love tie is severed. If a person handles this crisis well, the grief wound gradually heals.

¹Vernon R. Wiehe, "The Role of the Clergyman in the Grief Process," Concordia Theological Monthly, XLIII March 1972), 134.

"To relieve the pain, to ease the misery, is a responsibility and privilege not to be taken lightly."² Most doctors and ministers regard it as one of their roles to help the bereaved in constructive grief work. Yet in a recent survey of medical schools in the United States, thirty-five percent of the respondents said that the physician's responsibility in regard to the care of the dying patient's family was not included in the curriculum.³ The privilege of relating to another person at a deep level is an awesome responsibility. The opportunity to be of help can be very gratifying. The minister who relates to the bereaved in the crisis of death "is guilty of professional negligence if he fails to do wisely and well what he is called upon to do."⁴

If the funeral is going to be a beneficial and therapeutic experience, the minister will want to know what to do and what not to do in dealing with grief. There are no hard and fast blanket rules, but there are points to keep in mind. The most effective service depends on the specific individuals in the specific situation and must flow out of

²Edgar N. Jackson, Understanding Grief (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 144.

³Austin H. Kutscher and Austin H. Kutscher, Jr., "Medical School Curriculum and Anticipatory Grief: Faculty Attitudes," in Bernard Schoenberg and others (eds.) Anticipatory Grief (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 215.

⁴Edgar N. Jackson, "Understanding Grief," in Robert B. Reeves, Jr. and others (eds.) Pastoral Care of the Dying and the Bereaved (New York: Health Sciences, 1973), p. 73.

an understanding of the dynamic factors involved. The minister who is able to understand the dynamic factors at work in the personality of the bereaved, is in a position to direct them toward productive grief work.

THE PRIVILEGE OF GRIEVING

Human grief is not madness--it is natural. It is not a sign of weakness to be ashamed of or hidden--it is a gift of God's mercy. It is not an enemy--it is a privilege. It is the other side of the coin of love. It is the cost of merging your life with another life, it is the cost of commitment. It grows out of the high value that we place on life. The person who loves deeply is shaken to the depths when someone he loves dies.

The agony is so great . . .
 And yet I will stand it.
 Had I not loved so very much
 I would not hurt so much.
 But goodness knows I would not
 Want to diminish that precious love
 By one fraction of an ounce.
 I will hurt,
 And I will be grateful to the hurt
 For it bares witness to
 The depth of our meanings,
 And for that I will be
 Eternally grateful.⁵

GRIEF HURTS

Grief is one of the most excruciating pains a person

⁵ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Death (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 142.

can endure. We "pretend that 'loss' is not inherent in living, that 'suffering' is not appropriate for the righteous."⁶ Yet pain is a part of the process of healing. The minister can help by the communication of understanding, and this can be conveyed as well by the squeeze of the hand as by speech.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Grief not only registers our pain at the irrecoverable loss of another; it also lays bare the degree to which our self-understanding was developed in relation to the dead person. In the time of grief we are threatened with an acute identity crisis, since grief occurs only in those instances where death comes to someone who has been important in our life structure.

Whenever you love somebody you identify with them, a part of your self is projected into their life. When something good happens to them, you feel good about it; when something bad happens to them, you feel badly (Sic) about it; and, when something devastating happens to them, you can very well suffer the most acute type of emotional response that you will ever have.

The assumption of our independence and self-sufficiency is frighteningly challenged. We are reminded that we exist as

⁶Glen W. Davidson, Living With Dying (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), p. 87.

⁷Statement by Edgar N. Jackson in an address ("Pastoral Care of the Bereaved") at The School of Theology at Claremont, November 7, 1971 (tape on file in School of Theology Library).

persons only insofar as we are persons for and with others.

THE NEED FOR EXPRESSION: HEALTHY PAIN

Where people had a chance to act out and vent their deep feelings, to face reality, to gain group support, they were able to move through the crisis.

Mourning customs in Israel during the Biblical Period were rooted in common Middle Eastern practice.⁸ When death came, all the relatives and friends gave vent to their grief, aloud. They moaned and smote their breasts. They sobbed and lamented wherever they were (Isaiah 15:2-3; 32:11-12; Jeremiah 48:38).⁹ The rite of mourning most frequently attested in the narrative and poetic sections of the Bible is the rending of outer garments. Reuben rent his garments on finding Joseph's bloodstained cloak (Genesis 37:34). Job rent his garments on hearing of the death of his children (Job 1:20), and his friends tear their clothing to sympathize with him (2:12). The rending of garments may have been simply an outlet for pent-up emotions, or it may have developed as a symbolic substitute for the mutilation of flesh. Almost as frequent as the rending of garments was the wearing of coarse sackcloth (e.g., II Samuel 3:31;

⁸Cecil Roth, ed., "Mourning," Standard Jewish Encyclopedia, p. 1369.

⁹Hayyim Schauss, The Lifetime of a Jew Throughout the Ages of Jewish History (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1957), pp. 223, 319.

Psalm 30:12; Lamentations 2:10). Other mourning practices which survived in later Judaism are the strewing of dust on the head (Joshua 7:6; II Samuel 3:19; Jeremiah 6:26; 25:34; Ezekiel 27:30; Lamentations 2:10 etc.; compare Ta'anit 15b), refraining from wearing ornaments (Exodus 33:4; compare Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 389:3), abstaining from anointing and washing (II Samuel 3:35; Esther 4:3; Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 1:4; compare Ta'anit 1:4ff.). Mourners laid aside their head ornaments (compare Isaiah 61:10), covered their heads (II Samuel 15:30; Jeremiah 14:3-4; Esther 6:12; 7:8), covered the upper lip (Micah 3:7; Ezekiel 24:17), and sat (Ezekiel 26:16; Jonah 3:6; Job 2:13) or laid on the ground (II Samuel 13:31; Lamentations 2:21), as in later Judaism (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 387.1). Alongside the shaving of the head (Isaiah 22:12; Jeremiah 16:6; Ezekiel 7:18; Amos 8:10) and the shaving of the beard, the prophets take for granted the practice of cutting the hair, tattooing, and making incisions as a rite of mourning.¹⁰

During the Middle Ages, the most hardened warriors and the most renowned kings broke into tears over the bodies of friends and relatives. They wept, as we would say today, like hysterical women. King Arthur is one example. He often fainted, struck his breast, and tore at his skin until the blood flowed. We can find many instances, in the Biblical

¹⁰ Mayer Irwin Gruber, "Mourning," Encyclopaedia Judaica XII (1971), 485-487.

material, of the most uninhibited emotional outbursts.¹¹

The practice of wailing, beating the breast, and tearing the hair served the bereaved by maintaining communication between persons and between persons and God. From the thirteenth century on, the grand gesticulations of the early Middle Ages were simulated by professional mourners (who can be found in some parts of Europe even today).¹² Of course, we laugh at the idea of paid professional mourners; but, the bereaved were able to relate to them because they acted out what the bereaved were going through.

"To grieve" is an active verb, indicating that the process must be done actively. The more directly and openly grief is expressed, the more healthy the outcome can be expected to be.

Talk can be good. Every individual has a need to express his feelings to someone who understands and cares. The bereaved should be encouraged to talk all they want to, to express their feelings and thoughts in detail, not to hold back, to unload. There is healing value in this expression. Open-ended statements, such as, "Tell me what happened," or "Tell me how you feel," or "Tell me how things are going," give the bereaved a chance to work through their

¹¹Philippe Aries, "Death Inside Out," Hastings Center Studies, II (May 1974), 8.

¹²Ibid.

feelings and cleanse the grief wound. This experiencing and working through of deep feelings is extremely painful work. The bereaved need to be assured that it is acceptable to feel bad, to face pain, for it is not only healthy-- it is "an indispensable part of the healing."¹³ This talking process is cathartic. As the experience is discussed over and over, its painfulness is gradually lessened and relieved.

The bereaved need to be given the opportunity and assurance that emotions can be expressed in ways they find relieving. The way grief is expressed varies from one person to another. Some cry and sob, others pour out their feelings in other ways. The minister cannot prescribe the bereaved's feelings; he can only respect them. Dr. Colin Murray Parkes explains, "The important thing is for feelings to be permitted to emerge into consciousness."¹⁴

Many bereaved are surprised and frightened by the intensity of their emotions. The minister can lead them to believe that such feelings are perfectly natural and normal. It is not helpful to "protect" the living from responsibility and deny them the chance to express their feelings. It will not help the bereaved by trying to make them feel they are being heroic or brave to ignore their true feelings. To many men in our culture, the emotional expression of grief

¹³Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 169.

¹⁴Colin Murray Parkes, Bereavement (New York: International Universities Press, 1972), p. 162.

seems unmanly and humiliating. The minister needs to indicate explicitly to them that they do not need to be ashamed of their feelings, which are an important part of themselves. Feelings are neither moral nor immoral; they just are.

No one should tell the grieving: "Don't cry, everything is all right." To the grieving person, everything is anything but all right. It is ridiculous to tell the grieving, "Don't take it so hard," because such a person must take it hard. Too often crying is regarded as a sign of weakness, a lack of trust in God--when such is not the case at all. God provides us with tears to express our deepest feelings. Big men cry unashamedly (Cf. II Kings 8:11; Luke 19:41; John 11:35; Hebrews 5:7). Weeping is not to be feared or prevented. It is to be encouraged. It is like a safety valve. The bereaved should not hold back a good cry. It is not only natural and normal, it is also therapeutic.

In dealing with the newly bereaved, the minister must avoid intellectualizations. This is an emotional crisis. The minister should start with the people where they are, relate to them at the point where they are prepared to relate and then move on. Intellectualizations have their validity, and they can come along later.

It is important to give the bereaved time--time to think, to ventilate, to express their fears, concerns and

worries. Very few ministers have the time. However, much can be done in short periods, letting the bereaved discuss their fears and concerns in whatever manner they wish. They merit the minister's undivided attention, if only for short periods.

THE HAZARDS OF REPRESSION: UNHEALTHY PAIN

Twentieth-century America's attitudes toward death have complicated the process of grieving, since we tend to urge the repression of grief. Rev. Edgar Jackson, author of a number of books related to grief, explains,

During the last few decades, an attitude has found acceptance among many people that we should not show our feelings when we meet life crises, but rather should calmly try to think them through.¹⁵

It is no longer fitting to manifest one's sorrow or even give evidence of experiencing any. People who express their grief openly and honestly are considered by many to be morbid. The bereaved are cautioned, instructed, cajoled to control themselves and maintain their composure, not to "give in" to their grief, to think of all they have to live for. If they do not want to lose the respect of their friends, they are obliged to repress their feelings and express them only in private, if at all.

Many people consciously "keep a stiff upper lip" and swallow their emotion, leaving it undischarged. This

¹⁵Edgar N. Jackson, "What Is Happening to Feelings?" in Austin H. Kutscher and Lillian G. Kutscher (eds.) Religion and Bereavement (New York: Health Sciences, 1972), p. 55.

increases their strain, since they not only suffer from their feelings of grief but they have to struggle constantly to keep it bottled up. It is also common for grief to be unconsciously repressed. The painful feelings that are forced under the surface into the subconscious do not disappear. They still exert potent force upon the behavior of the individual. When grief can be acted out, it can be dealt with constructively; but, when it is denied, delayed or repressed, it produces serious physical and psychic disorders. It is not the expression of grief which leads to nervous breakdowns, but the withholding of normal human feelings which is the breeding ground for delayed illnesses. Those who fail to express their distress, who take death "wonderfully," and who sail through the whole experience with apparent serenity can have a terrific backlash at some future date. A distorted form of grief work may start on a Christmas, or a birthday, or an anniversary.

The practice in many of our communities of calling the doctor to prescribe tranquilizers for the grief-stricken can be useful, but it can also be a cop-out. This almost certainly constitutes a mistaken effort to spare the bereaved stress. Yet the longer the grief work is unduly delayed, the more difficult and painful it is to do it effectively. The longer the delay, the greater the price.

The investment of some people in the dead person is so strong that they experience severe difficulty in trying to

face reality. Some of the morbid aspects of unwisely managed grief, that should be taken as signs that all is not going as it should with the bereaved, include: Failure to adapt to the change the loss has brought to their lives; stopping living, cutting themselves off from new possibilities to grow, believing that it would be wrong to seek new expressions for living, or new relationships to people and tasks: persecutory delusions; sharply focused expressions of aggression which cause serious danger.¹⁶ Erich Lindemann, physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, lists nine abnormal reactions which are viciously destructive;

1. Overactivity, with a sense of well-being rather than a feeling of loss.
2. Acquisition of the symptoms of the last illness of the deceased.
3. A medical disease, psychogenic in nature, such as asthma, ulcerative colitis, and rheumatoid arthritis.
4. Marked alteration in relationship to friends and relatives.
5. Furious hostility against specific persons.
6. Loss of feelings as if acting out life, not living it.
7. Lasting loss of patterns of social relations, with general listlessness.
8. Behavior detrimental to one's own social and economic existence, such as unreasonable generosity.
9. Agitated moods of depression.¹⁷

The minister should be especially alert if there have been previous events in which the person was unable to endure emotional stress. When, despite his efforts, there is a reasonable degree of uncertainty about the course of events,

¹⁶Jackson, Understanding Grief, p. 177.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 168.

the minister should not hesitate in assisting the bereaved in getting the additional help of a specialist.

Although separation and loss can lead to all sorts of crises of the first order of significance in those individuals who cannot recognize and express their feelings, sometimes the normal reaction looks abnormal for short periods of time while acute distress exists. Studies show that grief can affect physical health. Psychological discomfort finds expression in medically recognizable body symptoms. Grief may bring such physiological reactions as: shortness of breath, choking, sighing, crying, hysterical reactions, nausea, loss of appetite or compulsive appetite, loss of sphincter control, dizziness, faintness,¹⁸ queasiness in the stomach, sharp pain in the abdomen, pounding or throbbing in the head, cottony feeling in the mouth, loss of awareness of surroundings,¹⁹ lack of physical strength and general exhaustion, food seems tasteless, general feeling of uneasiness or restlessness,²⁰ depressed pulse rate, lowered blood pressure,²¹ chills, tremors, little ability

¹⁸Edgar M. Jackson, "Why You Should Understand Grief: A Minister's Views," in Austin H. Kutscher and Lillian G. Kutscher (eds.) For The Bereaved (New York: Fell, 1971), p.33.

¹⁹C. Charles Bachmann, Ministering To The Grief Sufferer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 15-16.

²⁰Wiehe, p. 133.

²¹Edmond H. Babbitt, Comfort for Days of Sorrow (Albion, MI: Blodgett Press, 1960), p. 3.

to organize activity,²² hallucinations of the dead.²³ These symptoms are quite within the range of the normal on a short-term basis and nothing to be alarmed about. A sign of abnormality is present when the normal responses are indefinitely prolonged, or when they do not show up at all.

DYNAMICS OF GRIEF

To help those who grieve, those who work with the bereaved need to understand the dynamics of acute grief. Unless the minister knows the various normal dynamics of grief, he may think something is abnormal. Edgar Jackson clearly states that the coping "mechanisms that are operative need to be understood so that the boundaries between normal manifestations and those that need special attention may be more easily determined."²⁴

In order to try to understand as much as possible about the nature of grief, some efforts have been made to take it apart and look at it more closely. Certainly there are identifiable dynamics, but they do not follow in any sequence. They are not successive in the order in which they will be discussed or in any other order. They are not lineal.

²²Jackson, "Understanding Grief," p. 74.

²³Robert E. Neale, The Art of Dying (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 73.

²⁴Jackson, Understanding Grief, p. 74.

Certain dynamics can be bypassed entirely, while others (such as, anger) may last no more than a few minutes.

Members of one family do not all express grief in the same way. This is to be expected, since no two persons are alike. There are considerable differences from one person to another in regard to both the duration and the form of each dynamic. Rarely does a person fit a textbook example--this is the joy of being human.

Shock

When a person suffers the loss of a loved one with whom there have been vital interpersonal relations, a typical reaction is shock and a stunned feeling. Some feel cold, numb, dazed, empty, confused.²⁵ This is true if the death was sudden and unexpected, or even if it has been expected.²⁶ When a person is in shock he is unable to think clearly. This blessed anesthesia enables a person to bear what is probably the greatest pain of his life. The numbness constitutes a brief moratorium of feeling, a time when he would not yet emotionally have to comprehend the magnitude of his loss.

²⁵Ira Oscar Glick, Robert S. Weiss, and C. Murray Parkes, The First Year of Bereavement (New York: Wiley, 1974), p. 53.

²⁶James R. Hodge, "They That Mourn," Journal of Religion and Health, XI (July 1972), 232.

Denial

Numbness can be exhibited by outright denial. The survivor may be heard to say: "I knew he was sick. But this can't have happened," "Someone made a mistake," "No!" "It couldn't be!" "It can't be real," "It cannot be true," "It isn't so--my loved one hasn't died," "I can't make myself believe it." Clinical psychologist Manfred H. Hecht states:

It is important to understand that what may appear to be absence of feeling at the time of crisis does not necessarily present callousness, but rather may indicate that the emotional reaction is felt to be so overwhelming and excessive that it cannot be admitted to consciousness.²⁷

Humankind cannot bear too much reality. Denial, at least partial denial, is used as a defense mechanism to restore order to the chaos of a crisis.²⁸ Avery Weisman explains that a person can deny the facts, the implications, and even death itself.²⁹ Temporary denial, as part of a larger process of coping, is a valuable way of buffering painful situations.

The bereaved have a choice--to live permanently in denial or to face their feelings and work through them. A first step in grief work is the bereaved's awareness, comprehension, and acknowledgment that the dead is really

²⁷Manfred H. Hecht, "Dynamics of Bereavement," Journal of Religion and Health, X(October 1971), 367.

²⁸Davidson, p. 45.

²⁹Avery D. Weisman, "On the Value of Denying Death," Pastoral Psychology, XXIII (June 1972), 27.

dead. It takes time, and it is a painfully difficult task to confront openly and honestly the full reality of what has happened. But until the bereaved break through their denials, they cannot experience the essentially healthy pain of grief, and do their grief work well.

Long-term denial requires the reshaping of reality. The bereaved may cling to delusions that the dead person is still alive. One widow set the dinner table for two every evening, expecting her husband to come home.³⁰

In pretending that the death did not occur, the bereaved may be unable to respond with appropriate emotion. They may leave reality behind, and protect themselves against disturbing feelings of fear, anger, guilt, dread, sorrow, and depression. Their emotions may go flat. In an attempt to comfort, friends of the bereaved, supported by our culture's handling of death, may tend to reinforce the denial of intense feelings. Much of the funeral director's art helps the bereaved deny reality; for example, the viewing of a painted body in a "slumber" room. The minister, in conversation, prayer, the selection of Scripture passages, and the funeral sermon, may covertly encourage and aid the denial of the feelings experienced by the bereaved. Very often well-meaning persons participate in unreasonable denial that postpones the important grief work, affecting health

³⁰David Hendin, Death as a Fact of Life (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 179.

the structure of personality and the patterns of social relationships.

As the need for denial comes and goes, the sensitive listener should respect this and allow the bereaved the use of short-term denial mechanisms as he copes with his crisis. The listener should not try to shoot down the bereaved's short-term defenses. As a representative of caring love, the minister should take the time to be especially present and may reassure the bereaved, by a touch or a look, that he is not deserted. It is the ministry of caring presence, not the carefully chosen words that help most at this point. A listener should not talk on and on. He should give the bereaved a chance to talk.

Disorganization

Another phase of healthy grief is disorganization.³¹ This reaction can be better understood if the impact of the death on the future of the bereaved is understood. The death of a spouse, for instance, may mean the loss of a sexual partner, companion, accountant, gardener, baby-minder, audience, bed-warmer, and so on, depending upon the particular roles previously performed by the spouse.³² Moreover, the death of a spouse may be accompanied by a drop

³¹Davidson, pp. 37-38.

³²Parkes, p. 7.

in financial income, changes in the status and class positions or reference groups, and perhaps a move to a strange environment. "We" becomes "I," "our" becomes "mine," "married" becomes "single," "wife" becomes "widow;" the partnership is dissolved. When death strikes, things change.

The need of the disorganized is the physical presence of one they can trust, one who admits that he cares. The word "comfort" really means: strengthened by being with. During the acute crisis, the bereaved need someone who will be with them physically, not merely by telephone. The minister's presence and availability are most important. The bereaved's hope is reliance upon the fact that strong people are near to give aid when they need it.

A minister's presence is more important than his many words. True friendship and true love are not made uncomfortable by silence. The minister may let the bereaved know that it is all right to say nothing. He should not feel pressed to fill the air with words. Chatter only shows that one is uncomfortable and cannot bear to talk honestly. It is best for the minister simply to admit his concern. Religious preachment and pious platitudes seem irrelevant, and can inflame the wound. Human words are empty at a time like this. The bereaved may ask for why's and wherefore's, but they do not really require or expect answers. No sermon has to be delivered or words of wisdom

given--they can be intensely irritating. Physical contact, hugging, handholding: these are the proofs the survivors need, not logical reasoning. Most needed is the physical presence of a non-judgmental human being who is there because love has prompted him to come.

Fear

There is fear: fear of being overwhelmed, fear of "What will happen to me now," fear of one's own death, fear of the unknown, fear of grief. Death may get to be routine to the minister, but it may be the first time the bereaved has ever faced it.

The fear of abandonment calls for the Church to be with, to surround, to be community, to affirm life in the face of death. There is no justification for the almost total abandonment of the bereaved immediately following the death of a loved one. All too often, however, everyone including ministers, doctors, relatives, and friends, suddenly disappear, thereby ignoring the needs of the newly bereaved, why people do not seem to want to talk about death, why people treat the bereaved as if they had a contagious disease, why people abandon the bereaved, constitutes in large part a retreat from their own unresolved conflicts concerning death and grief.

Yearning

Another dynamic of healthy grief work is characterized by painful yearning for the dead person.

The mind becomes obsessed with everything that can be recalled about the deceased. Familiar sounds and smells may, at least momentarily, make the mourner believe that their loved one has returned.³³

Finding a photograph or waking up alone in a double bed precipitate painful pangs of anxious yearning for the dead person who is gone and never will return.

Hostility

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned,³⁴
--Edna St. Vincent Millay

Hostility is another component of grief. Anger, rage, and resentment may be directly expressed toward the dead person. Feelings of anger may be expressed toward the dead person for not having cared for himself better or for having contributed in some other way to his own death, such as, the case of an alcoholic. There may be anger at the dead for causing pain by dying ("Why did you do this to me, why have you hurt me?"). The bereaved may experience the death in terms of an abrupt termination of goals and

³³Davidson, p. 37.

³⁴Edna St. Vincent Millay and Norma Millay Ellis, Collected Poems (New York: Harper & Row, 1928).

ambitions ("Why did you have to die on me, when we just started this new project?"). The bereaved may feel angry for being left alone and unprovided for with a family to support ("he deserted me; he hasn't taken care of me as he should have; he pulled a dirty trick on me by dying!").

If there is a person who may be indentified as responsible, the anger may be directed against him: the drunk driver, the army general, the scapegoat. Anger may be directed against the "trick of fate" that caused the person to take that freeway, that airplane, that surgery. Physicians and God are favorite targets since both are seen as having power over life and death ("Why didn't the doctor do something? Why didn't he get there when I called? Why did he delay his coming when he was called? Why did he fail to do the right thing at the right time? Why didn't he admit our loved one to the hospital sooner, or why didn't he leave him home? Did he really do everything that was medically possible?"). God (or the minister who stands as God's representative) may be attacked for "allowing this to happen" ("Why did that all-loving God of yours take my Patty away? Why did God do it? Why did God cheat me? Why did you deceive me?"). The bereaved may become irritable and angry and even blame whoever is nearby: nurses, some member of the family, life-long friends, funeral directors, and other whipping posts. Irrational anger at family, friends, and strangers may baffle and worry

the bereaved; they may question their own sanity. They may not realize that their anger is neither an unusual or inappropriate part of grief.

When the survivors grieve for a loved one, they are likely also to feel the anger that they had for him.³⁵ The ability to both love and feel angry with a person is very real. Not realizing this ambivalence may cause the survivors to be very disturbed. Understanding this fact can aid them in coping with their feelings.

Anger is very difficult to accept and facilitate, especially by persons who have been brainwashed to believe that good people don't get angry or "lose their heads" or "fly off the handle," but instead "take it." To hear a survivor curse God or his dead spouse is too much for many ears to take. Friends interrupt these violent outbursts with explanations and glib assurance. Doctors prescribe tranquilizers. Ministers try to avoid them, and sometimes take it out on their own spouses when they get home.

What helps is not to judge but to try to comprehend why the bereaved do what they do--to identify with them. If the minister is aware that it is normal for hostile feelings to follow a death, he will be better able to deal with such feelings, which may be projected in all directions. If the bereaved keep "in" their feelings, rather than working

³⁵Paul E. Irion, The Funeral and the Mourners (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 50.

them "out," the bottled-up feelings will be an obstacle to constructive grief work. If the minister tolerates the bereaved's anger, whether it is directed at the minister, at another, or even at God, he will be helping them. God can take it. The minister should be prepared for outbursts of anger, and show acceptance of the bitterness rather than shock. He should understand that he is not the actual target and should not take it personally.

There is release in the expression of hostility. The bereaved need to be given opportunities to ventilate their feelings. They need to be assured that it is safe to be transparently real and even encouraged to express their hostility. Americans do not know how to show these feelings, and hospitals and funeral homes and parsonages are not places where most people can comfortably show them. If the bereaved want to yell and scream, they need someone who can listen without being threatened. A caring person should be available to let them share and ventilate some of their rage--to talk, cry, or rant and rave. This is perhaps an opportunity for the minister to be the only one who really listens and does not play games. However, the minister can do this only when he has become aware of his own defenses which may interfere with the bereaved's process of coping.

If the bereaved act out their hostile feelings in a healthy manner early in the game, they will be spared an acting out that is destructive in its nature. Buried feelings

fester. If the bereaved are not allowed to ventilate their thoughts and feelings, their grief will be prolonged, which can lead to emotional and physical ill health, such as, depression, arthritis, asthma, ulcers.

Guilt

Feelings of guilt are a common reaction for those who grieve. Few escape such a reaction. Knowing that this is natural and true of most of us can be very helpful.

Mean questions nag the survivors: "Was he still resenting my cruel remarks or actions? Why didn't I ever treat him right? How can I make amends for my misdeeds to him?" The bereaved go over their behavior, searching for ways they let the dead person down, ways they ignored and hurt him, times they said thoughtless and unfair words, times they were inconsiderate or impatient or selfish. "Death closes the door on making amends, opens the door to a flood of 'If only...' thoughts."³⁶

Some persons have guilt feelings because they hold themselves responsible for the death: "If only I hadn't taken that curve so fast!" "If only I had insisted that he quit smoking." These feelings rest on the supposition that what the bereaved did or failed to do was fateful. The bereaved may also feel guilt-ridden since they have

³⁶Joseph Bayly, The View From A Hearse (Elgin, IL: Cook, 1969), p. 35.

survived, or since they feel relieved that it happened to someone else rather than to themselves.

There may be real guilt feelings arising out of real or fancied negligence in the care of the loved one. The bereaved may exaggerate minor omissions, but guilt can be just as disturbing whether there is any real basis for it or not. The bereaved may accuse themselves of contributing in some way to the death: "If only I had done more," "If only I had gotten him to the doctor sooner," "If only I had gotten Dr. so-and-so," "If only I had gotten to his bedside," "If only I hadn't left his bedside--things would be different."

Feelings of guilt may spring from the bereaved's awareness that they should have done more, written more often, gone to visit more often, and so forth:

We made the long, tedious trip to visit the dead --why not to visit the living? . . . We failed her in life. We could have meant so much to her, have touched her and her us. We could have brought mental, if not physical, healing. We could have brought joy, if only momentary, to a person. We could have relished the living; instead we revered the dead. . . . We gave her a lovely, expensive coffin and a poverty-stricken existence. We were generous with the money for the tombstone--indeed it cost more than all the last three Christmas gifts combined. . . . For her unfeeling "comfort" we generously offered her the finest, smoothest satin; for her fitful, uneasy sleep, lumps for a mattress and old cold sheets for covers.³⁷

"Dear Abby" says that the following letter prompted the most

³⁷ Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Grandma's Funeral: Painful Post-Mortem," Eternity, (October 1969), 16-17.

requests for reprints:

I am the most heartbroken person on earth. I always found time to go everywhere else but to see my old, gray-haired parents. They sat at home alone, loving me just the same. It's too late now to give them those few hours of happiness I was too selfish and too busy to give, and now when I go to visit their graves and look at the green grass above them, I wonder if God will ever forgive me for the heartaches I must have caused them. I pray that you will print this, Abby, to tell those who still have parents to visit them and show their love and respect while there's still time. For it is later than you think.
Signed: TOO LATE.³⁸

Some may hold themselves responsible for the death because they harbored death wishes: "I told him to 'drop dead;' I said, 'I hope you die.'" I thought if he died, I could find a better husband. I wished him dead and he died. Could I really have caused him to die? Could I have killed him?"

The feelings of hostility, discussed above, are almost inevitably complicated by feelings of guilt. In life there were opportunities to make up after disagreements, "to prove love after expressing resentment;"³⁹ but after death occurs, the opportunities for reconciliation are no longer present. Sometimes this element of anger may be directed at relatives, friends, and professionals. Hospitals, doctors, and nurses may be criticized and blamed for letting the loved one die, rather than be praised for trying to help.

³⁸ Abigail Van Buren, "Ask Them Yourself," Family Weekly, (July 27, 1975), 1.

³⁹ William F. Rogers, Ye Shall Be Comforted (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), p. 53.

A "phase of ambivalent feelings might arise in situations where there is both loss and gain connected with the death."⁴⁰ The death of a father may be a severe loss to the family, but it might also mean that the son inherits the family business. The death of an invalid may be a severe loss, but it might also mean a great relief in having the burden of caring for the person lifted. A death might be a severe loss, and yet the bereaved may be glad that the person died before all the money was gone which paid the expenses of terminal illness.

The bereaved may also feel guilty because they are not as inwardly composed as they pretend to be. The community may think the bereaved are "taking it wonderfully," when they are really torn by pain. This hypocrisy is a source of guilt. On the other hand, the survivors may feel no sorrow at the death of an estranged relative, and feel guilty because they feel no sorrow.

There is another way in which guilt feelings may arise. The thought they they are repaying God's never-ending help and comfort with a complete lack of trust makes some feel very guilty.

Whether these feelings of guilt arise out of reality or fantasy, they must be honestly confronted and worked through. The bereaved need to clarify them, bring them out in the open, and bring them into true perspective. By dealing with them, the tension will be reduced. Rather

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 50.

than hiding the fact, the bereaved need to release through talking out their guilt feelings. The minister can be of great help by relieving the bereaved of any unrealistic approach and by affirming that from his observation everybody did everything possible. There is no reason to reinforce or amplify the guilt. By listening carefully and attentively, the minister "can often elicit the more realistic reason for their guilt."⁴¹ If the bereaved know and are assured that such self-condemnation and guilt feelings are a usual accompaniment of the process of grief they will be helped to meet these feelings.

The only way out is through. To unacknowledge or bury guilt is wrong. To fixate too long or too intensely on guilt is abnormal, and may lead to self-injury, self-deprivation, self-rejection, severe depression, and possibly suicide. "Nobody can estimate the extent of medical bills for treating unexpressed grief."⁴²

Depression in the Face of Loss and Loneliness

And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark.
-- Alfred Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar"

In contrast to Tennyson's words, people expect the bereaved to be depressed. Faced with a great loss and

⁴¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 161.

⁴² Robert E. Kavanaugh, Facing Death (Los Angeles: Nash, 1972), p. 113.

the realization of one's own vulnerability and mortality, stressed over the cost of medical bills, worried over the future, confronted with feelings of hostility and guilt--it is natural for the bereaved to give way to depression, "a kind of mourning for oneself."⁴³ After the funeral, it is natural for the bereaved to feel like giving up on living. A time comes when they cannot smile it off anymore nor "be brave."

Our usual reaction to a sad person is to tell him not to be sad. "This is often an expression of our own needs, our own inability to tolerate a long face over any extended period of time."⁴⁴ The bereaved will appreciate those who can sit with them during this time of depression and allow them to express their sorrow. Often they will not want to talk. They must live through many lonely hours and empty days. There is no real short cut.

The bereaved are depressed because someone unique and irreplaceable--someone for which there is no substitute --is lost once for all. This is not evident when man is viewed "as a leaf on the tree of the world--falling off, blown away, but replaced;" it is evident if man is understood as a piece of history.⁴⁵ When two hearts have

⁴³Carol R. Murphy, The Valley of the Shadow Wallingford, PA:(Pendle Hill, 1972), p. 4.

⁴⁴Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p. 87.

⁴⁵Helmut Thielicke, Death and Life (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 115.

become one, death rips apart the one heart. The bereaved may say, "I feel as if a part of me is gone." In his diary, A Grief Observed, C. S. Lewis explains, "At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall presently be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again."⁴⁶

The bereaved may say, "My dear wife is gone. She was too young to die." These feelings for the dead may be interpreted as a sense of loss to the bereaved: "I miss her. I wish she were here. I am too young for her to die. I feel sorry for me."⁴⁷ The bereaved grieve for their own lonely evenings. A double bed is single. A dinner is not cooked. A crib is empty. Death leaves an aching emptiness.

Loneliness can be terribly frightening. The minister does not "know what it is like," for it is not his loss. Relatives, friends, and the minister should make themselves available--not just for a few days, but for several months. They can encourage the bereaved to let loose of the past and feel needed in the present.

Affirmation of Life

It is important for the bereaved to grieve. It is

⁴⁶C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), p. 43.

⁴⁷Hodge, p. 230.

also important for them to start building new identities. If they are given enough time and some help in working through their feelings and thoughts, they will gradually be able to disengage themselves from the bonds that tie them to the dead. They will be able to adjust to functioning in an environment without the person who is dead. Healing will take place, and they will be able to reinvest emotional capital in forming new relationships. They will be able to live without the person they thought they could not live without. The minister can help them sort through their thoughts, assessing the meaning of what has happened to them and who they are now.

The Place of Hope and Faith

Hope is a thread running throughout all grief, "Holding the person together in fantasy at first, then in the promise of a new life."⁴⁸ Dr. Kübler-Ross has remarked that genuinely religious people with a deep abiding relationship with God find it much easier to face death.⁴⁹ Half-faith is not enough.

The minister who is "in touch" with the bereaved may be able to find the right prayer or helpful Scripture, overcoming the temptation to avoid involvement and hide behind "easy" answers. The use of a prayer book or a

⁴⁸ Kavanaugh, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Associated Press dispatch, "Life beyond grave, says noted psychiatrist," Progress Bulletin (Pomona CA), September 21, 1975.

Biblical quotation must not be allowed to be the sole communication between the minister and the bereaved. The bereaved need ministers who will listen to their needs and difficult questions.

DURATION OF GRIEF

A little booklet by the Clark Grave Vault Company states, "Public mourning for a year or a month or any stated time is just a relic of past beliefs."⁵⁰ Americans tend to assume that grief is an enemy to be banished quickly. Yet, it takes time to heal a painful wound.

The term "quarantine" comes from "quarantina," the Italian for "forty," which was the number of days of isolation expected of the widow.⁵¹ Jews distinguish four stages in the mourning period: aninut, the period between death and burial; shivah, the seven days following burial; sheloshim, the time until the thirtieth day after burial; and the first year (Jerusalem Talmud, Mo'ed Katan 3:7, 83c).⁵² Reform Judaism recommends a one-year period of mourning. Orthodox and Conservative Judaism observe an eleven-month period.⁵³ While such social expectations concerning the duration of mourning cannot, of course,

⁵⁰My Duty (Columbus, OH: Clark Grave Vault, 1968). p. 23.

⁵¹Parkes, p. 160.

⁵²"Mourning; Talmudic and Medieval Periods," Encyclopaedia Judaica (1971), XII, 488-489.

⁵³Joseph Gaer and Rabbi Alfred Wolf, Our Jewish Heritage (Hollywood, CA: Wilshire, 1957), p. 133.

correspond to all the various individual needs, the lack of any social expectations, as in America today, leaves the bereaved confused. Unfortunately, friends tend to express their condolences, and then after the first week or two the bereaved are left high and dry. The fact is that the process of grief usually takes at least one year.

It is a custom among Jews, on the first anniversary of the funeral, to "unveil" a marker on the grave.⁵⁴ The Christian community needs some event at the end of the year. We need a ritual acting out of our feelings. For the Christian community, there ought to be a ritual of affirmation.

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Grief work may begin well before the actual death. Many will partially work through the grieving process in anticipation of the death. The term "anticipatory grief" is used to mean the grief which occurs prior to the death, as distinguished from the grief which occurs at or after the death.

It is important to remember that most of the deaths in America come at the end of a long process. With people living in nursing homes and separated from the family structure, there is a long process of emotional withdrawal.

However, anticipatory grieving can never be complete.

⁵⁴Ibid.

No matter how well a person prepares himself for life without another there are still things that cannot be anticipated.

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

It is one thing for adults to work through their grief; it is quite another for adults to realize that they must let children work through their grief, too. Generally, children are not allowed to grieve. They are "spared" with the presumption that it would be "too much" for them. Loving parents, thinking they are protecting their children from pain and grief, shelter them from dying and death. Many adults "put up a good front for the children's sake," shielding them "Until they are old enough to understand."

As has been mentioned in chapter one, our modern situation is complicated by the fact that many people pass through their childhood and adolescence without experiencing the death of any close person. In contrast to a century ago, few children live under the same roof with their grandparents, or experience the death of a brother or sister or peer.

When a death does occur, children also must be allowed to work through their grief. They should not be excluded from sharing grief any more than they should be excluded from sharing joy in the life of the family. Attempts to protect them from suffering are not helpful; such

"help" is detrimental and destructive.

When someone dies, a child may be too young to understand but not too young to feel.⁵⁵ Children react to deaths with emotional overtones just as other people do. To adults, the ways in which children act out their feelings may seem inappropriate. They may seem puzzling, callous, unconcerned, irreverent, repulsive, or even delinquent. Adults need to understand that such behavior is common, and they need to be perceptive to what it really means.

It is essential to take into account the world view and personal experiences of children, which are so often overlooked or misinterpreted. Children grapple with the idea of death, but not with the same meanings that it has for us who are older. Their concepts need to be taken into account in order to talk with and understand them. Every child is a unique individual, yet the way he perceives death is related to his age.

Up to about three years of age a child is concerned only with presence and absence, later followed by the fear of mutilation.⁵⁶ Up to about five years, children do not recognize death as final: "Bang! I shot you. You are dead!" --and then you start all over again and play another game. These children perceive life as never ceasing. They seem

⁵⁵"Helping Children Understand," Ideas Today: I (March-April 1975), 3.

⁵⁶Kübler-Ross, p. 178.

to view death as a temporary departure,⁵⁷ like someone resting or sleeping or taking a trip; they believe grandpa will awaken or their pet bird will return. Between roughly the ages of six and ten, children begin to realize death is final but rebel against the idea of it eventually happening to everyone and especially not to themselves.⁵⁸ Now there is a tendency to personify death as someone scary, such as a bogey-man, a skeleton, an eerie ghost,⁵⁹ a ferocious monster, or some other Grim Reaper who comes to take people away. Finally, around the ages of nine to ten, dying is recognized as an inevitable process.⁶⁰

Rather than having formal sessions for death education and answering questions which are not being asked, the easiest and most effective death education will take place during the child's daily life in his real world. Children should be allowed to talk freely and ask their own questions--while grownups do not have to come up with all the answers. It is no disgrace for a parent to tell a child that the answer the child seeks is unknown.

It is important that the child be guided toward an

⁵⁷Kavanaugh, p. 129.

⁵⁸Gladys J. Kleinschmidt, "Helping the Bereaved Child," Moody Monthly (July-August 1970), 9.

⁵⁹Hendin, p. 143.

⁶⁰Maria H. Nagy, "The Child's View of Death," in Herman Feifel (ed.) The Meaning of Death (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 98.

honest understanding of death. The TRUTH is best. Honest answers are important to the child. It is cruel to avoid his questions or invent a story that leads to his distrust of adults and unresolved grief. To say "the loved one has gone on a long journey" is untrue and is an explanation which the child must sooner or later unlearn; far from being comforted, the child may feel deserted, angry, guilty, and anxious. To say "God loved Daddy so much that He took him to heaven" is a good way to breed an atheist. To say "Daddy has merely gone to sleep" might make the child afraid of bedtime and the dark.⁶¹ When adults wittingly or unwittingly misrepresent or obscure the facts, it is very difficult for the child to come to terms with the reality of death. Parents who are honest enough to ventilate their own feelings in the presence of their children will grant permission to their children to feel what they feel. Seeing adults grieve is not harmful, rather it can encourage and facilitate the children's grief.

Children should not be deprived of their right to grieve. Like adults, children have the need to share and work through their feelings, all kinds of feelings. They should be given the opportunity and freedom to express and release their feelings and fears and fantasies. They need to be listened to, and not just to listen. They need to be

⁶¹Earl A. Grollman (ed.) Explaining Death To Children (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 10-12.

helped to understand, more than ever, that there are people who love them and that they definitely will not be left alone with no one to care for them. Neither children nor adults can grieve in a healthy way without expressing their pain and having the support and understanding of others.

Delayed or distorted grief will cause trouble. If the children's feelings are denied, the feelings do not go away. If the children bury their pain rather than share it, serious problems can arise.

THE RISK OF INVOLVEMENT

In sharing with the bereaved, the minister brings his own past experiences and his present agenda with him. This is fine as long as they do not get in the way--as long as they are a vehicle for caring and not an obstacle to caring. Ministering with the bereaved will set off memories of the minister's own former experiences of death. It may be especially difficult to deal with the death of children about the same age as his own. Dealing with the death of an adult about his own age may be threatening, confronting him with his own death of the death of his spouse. Dealing with the death of an elderly person, the minister may find he is working through the death of one of his parents.

The minister cannot remain immune from the pain of grief. To be open to help also means to become open for hurt.

If death costs the minister nothing he is avoiding involvement. If it wipes him out he cannot minister.

LAITY AND GRIEF MINISTRY

People who have some knowledge of how it feels to have experienced a death may be particularly well qualified to help the bereaved. Throughout the country, churches and communities are organizing "Grief Therapy Teams" made up of people who have gone through the experience of confronting death. These teams are given short courses on the dynamics of grief and how to help. Thereafter, they continue to meet for mutual support and help with special problems. These teams visit the bereaved, representing the Church's concern, and sustain and support them with understanding and genuine response to real feelings. Working on such a team may heal wounds for the members and give them an opportunity to serve others in a gratifying way.

Groups have been formed of those who are working through their grief. In the social context of sharing with others who have been hurt by a death, the bereaved can examine and work out common problems, get trained assistance in assessing their feelings, and find moral support.

Chapter 4

CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

A substantial number of moderns say they do not want to be buried "with fuss." "Fuss" is the word used to characterize gloomy funeral services with somber hymns, long prayers, lengthy eulogies, rhymed sentimentalisms, pretty poems about lovely flowers and golden sunsets, long canned sermons, and insensitive, hollow rituals. Fortunately, there are alternatives.

The Talmud refers to the importance of funerals when it says, "The study of the Torah may be interrupted to bear out a corpse and to help a bride to marry" (Megillah 3b)¹ In this final chapter, we now come to focus specifically on Christian funerals themselves. In light of our discussion in Chapters One through Three, we now consider the heavy weight which Christian funerals must bear.

There is no single proper funeral service. Thus, this chapter does not dictate some static form or content that must be followed. Rather, it offers some hopefully helpful and practical suggestions for building sensitive funerals. The functions of Christian funerals are presented to be used as criteria for evaluating such funerals. The project concludes with one Christian funeral.

¹A. Cohen, Everyman's Talmud (New York: Dutton, 1949), p. 226.

THE NEED FOR VARIABILITY

Every funeral is unique. There is no one package. The same suit will not fit every man. Neither will the same funeral. One should not have to pick funerals "off the rack." Like made-to-measure clothes, there should be individuality about the funeral service.

What is appropriate for me may not be appropriate for someone else, or may not be appropriate for me tomorrow. An appropriate funeral event must be consistent with the assessed needs of the bereaved and the personal value system(s) of the people involved. A funeral is helpful only when it is directly and honestly related to the values of the person who has died and meaningful for the survivors. In his appropriately titled book For the Living, Edgar Jackson reminds us that everything that is done at the funeral in the whole structure of acting-out procedures is done for the people who continue to live on with their own thoughts, feelings, fears, and hopes.² Thus the funeral should be evaluated in terms of the ways it serves the living.

There needs to be wide latitude for individual

² Edgar N. Jackson, For the Living (Des Moines, IA: Channel Press, 1963), p. 19.

differences, without doing violence to the Gospel. The clergyperson must not impose his value system on the bereaved. However, in the case of Christian funerals, his frame of values and the family's frame of values will hopefully be almost the same. Christian funerals should lift up the value systems of the Church. I hope my funeral reflects my faith.

THE FUNCTIONS OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

Not Merely Disposal

The body of a person who has died needs to be disposed of in a legal, sanitary and reverent manner. A family may choose to remove the body from its place of death and transfer it to its site of final disposition without ceremony. Twelve percent of all deaths in California are dealt with in this fashion.³ In Chapter One it was pointed out that there is a growing demand for immediate disposition and rejection of traditional services. Immediate disposition is rapidly gaining popularity among those who do not want to have to go through all of the "fuss" of a traditional funeral. Such concern is often limited to economics.⁴ Of course, a funeral service is

³Statement by Paul Halquist in an address ("California Funeral Directors Association") in course AM256 Living with Death, at The School of Theology at Claremont, July, 1975.

⁴Jackson, p. 66.

not required in order to dispose of a corpse but it does provide an acceptable way. In the following discussion it will become clear that those who reject funeral services and order an immediate disposition are losing important opportunities.

Memorializing

Of course, the tribute that is paid to the dead at a funeral does not do the dead any good. The funeral can and should be a time to celebrate life--the unique life of the specific person who has died and the life we all share. With reverence and respect we say good-bye. Personal words delivered in dignity and love, even humor, tell of life. Certainly, more than a hymn and a Scripture verse is needed. Yet, many ministers give the sad impression that they have "a repertory of three or four such 'personalized' services, designed like Sears Roebuck seat covers to fit any and all makes and models of cars."⁵

Expressing Feelings

A funeral will serve as a healthy ceremonial when it helps the bereaved recognize, accept, and express

⁵ William May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," in Liston O. Mills (ed.) Perspectives on Death, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), pp. 175-176.

their authentic feelings rather than deny them. A funeral should explicitly acknowledge the dynamic factors involved in the painful privilege of grieving (See Chapter Three). Contemporary funerals are often calculated to repress grief. Misguided people trying to "make things easier" create meaningless and sterile funerals. Rather than allowing the funeral to be an outlet for emotion, they minimize emotion in a very high control situation. They hide the body because viewing it often is accompanied by weeping and sobbing. They hold the funeral in a funeral home which is a place where most people cannot comfortably show their feelings. The mourners are seated in the body of the funeral chapel while the family is shielded off in a side room, "so they will not 'embarrass themselves' with public displays of grief-as though there was something wrong with honest emotion."⁶ Some rule out music because it tends to trigger the emotions. They strive to make the funeral impersonal because repeating the name of the dead person creates emotion. Seeking to do things in a smooth, orderly fashion they select Scripture and prepare a sermon with the goal of not arousing feelings.

Of course, a funeral should not shoot down the bereaved's short-term defenses. Neither should it deny the

⁶Liston O. Mills, "Pastoral Care of the Dying and the Bereaved," in Mills, Perspectives on Death, p. 277.

fact of death nor the validity of the real feelings that attend it. While a Christian funeral celebrates the hope of our resurrection faith, it also must recognize the bereaved's emotions and the bereaved's need to express their emotions which are too deep to be put into words.

More emphasis needs to be placed on the needs of the bereaved. A Christian funeral should provide an acceptable setting within which the bereaved are permitted and even encouraged to express genuine emotions rather than repress them. It is an unique occasion on which the bereaved can confront the reality of death and act out their collective grief at the irrevocable end of a valued relationship. According to Dr. Erich Lindemann of the Harvard Medical School,

the funeral is psychologically necessary in order to give the opportunity for "grief work." The bereaved must be given the capacity to work through his grief if he is to come out of that situation emotionally sound.⁷

A funeral provides an environment in which the expression of grief can begin. It establishes the climate in which healthy expression can continue following the funeral.

Nowhere does the New Testament imply that a "grin and bear it" attitude in the face of death is a mark of faith. A funeral dramatizes the need for grieving.

⁷ Richard W. Doss, The Last Enemy (New York: Harper Row, 1974), p. 65.

The service needs to give the bereaved the opportunity and assurance that their natural and normal emotions can be expressed in ways they find relieving. Familiar hymns, Scripture, and personal prayers may help to release dammed-up feelings and facilitate grieving. Since this is an emotional crisis, intellectualizations must be avoided at this point; they can come along later.

Humor can be a vehicle in dealing with the painful experience. Laughter eases tension, and it is socially acceptable. Men find it easier to laugh than to cry. Laughter allows us to cry. The minister can share examples of the dead person's sense of humor, thus encouraging spontaneous laughter and helping gut-level feelings to be expressed. "Even in death we can affirm the joy of Life."⁸ A funeral without emotion is the funeral of one who lived a life totally alone.

Facing Death Socially

A Christian funeral is a social happening. Human existence is social in character, and when a member of the social group dies, the group participates in the funeral. The funeral "permits facing reality not only

⁸ Robert D. Firebaugh, "Humor: A Resource for Funeral Preaching," United Methodists Today/Today's Ministry Section, I (November 1974), 73-74.

personally but socially."⁹ It provides the community opportunity to recognize the loss of one of its members, and to offer support to those who were closest to the person who died.

At times, the funeral has the effect of drawing the family together. Relatives gather together from various locations and provide emotional and social support for one another when it is desperately needed. The funeral provides the loving friends and relatives an opportunity to express their continued concern and compassion which is of immeasurable support to the bereaved. Chaplain Paul E. Irion points out, "A funeral is an occasion for the bereaved person to experience love without being expected to give love in return."¹⁰ It can be a public expression of Christian solidarity, giving the Christian community an opportunity to minister by expressing their emotional and spiritual support. Those who admit that they care strengthen the disorganized and fearful by their physical presence and their availability to give aid (See Chapter Three). This coming together to give support is

⁹Jackson, p. 38.

¹⁰Paul E. Irion, "The Church and the Bereaved," in Robert B. Reeves, Jr., Robert E. Neale, and Austin H. Kutscher (eds.) Pastoral Care of the Dying and Bereaved: (New York: Health Sciences, 1973), p. 90.

real whether it is explicitly recognized in the funeral or not.

Ideally, a funeral offers a fellowship of concerned people with whom grief sufferers can be themselves. Edgar Jackson explains,

We burst into tears more easily when we see others crying. . . . The funeral brings together a group of persons who have common feelings, who support each other in the act of pouring out their emotions.¹¹

The community as well as the family needs the opportunity to recognize the death of one of its members. Sociologist Robert Fulton points out that "death is too personal to be private." A private funeral separates the bereaved from the supportive community when the support is needed most.¹² At the same time a private ceremony deprives the other members of the community of the benefits of facing reality and doing some of their own anticipatory grief work and their own unfinished grief work. The people who want private ceremonies are denying the community the meaningful participation in this whole process. It is a tragedy not to allow the community to offer their support

¹¹Jackson, p. 94.

¹²Edgar N. Jackson, "Making a Funeral Serve a Useful Purpose," Death Disguised is still Death, Supplement to the Christian Faith in Life Series Where is thy Sting? by Hoover Rupert (Nashville: Graded Press, 1969), p. 2.

or express their feelings, or to exclude the community by having a private ceremony or scheduling the event when the community cannot participate.

Acknowledging the Fearful Reality of Mortality and Loss

The main purpose of many modern funerals seems to be to conceal and deny death rather than to help the bereaved accept its reality and deal with the loss realistically. We seem to want to deceive ourselves and encourage living in a state of illusion and unreality. The funeral which proclaims "There is no death" prevents the bereaved from facing reality and moving on about the process of healthy living.

The living cannot live until the dead die. One of the values of the funeral process is that by emphasizing the painful reality of the death, rather than by avoiding or denying it, the fact that the death has actually taken place is reinforced.

The process of actualizing the loss can be speeded up by verbalization. In Chapter One it was pointed out that evasive and devious euphemisms are a part of the conspiracy to avoid facing circumstances as they are. We must not shroud death. We must not allow the taboo on talking about death to contribute to the existence or persistence of death denial.

The funeral provides a sense of finality.

"It is a time for the living to face the fact of their mortality."¹³ Humanity's dependence on God is seen as the mystery and pain of death is confronted. (See Chapter Two).

A funeral ceremony provides a setting in which the community can take leave of the person who has died, it is a "rite of separation."¹⁴ It is a "dramatization of loss."¹⁵ The process of making arrangements, selecting a coffin, visiting with friends and relatives, viewing the body, attending a service, and going to the grave, stresses the reality and finality of separation. All this drama reminds us that no person is an island and that, when someone dies, we all die a little. The funeral should aid the bereaved to accept the reality of their loss openly and with authenticity. Since a person can accept only so much pain, the funeral must support the bereaved as they face the impact of their

¹³Edgar N. Jackson, The Christian Funeral. (New York: Channel Press, 1955), p. 33.

¹⁴Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 146.

¹⁵William F. Rogers, "The Relationship of the Funeral to Counseling With the Bereaved," Pastoral Psychology, VIII (November 1957), 28.

loss. As they are overwhelmed by the "last enemy" which destroys an irrecoverable relationship, the funeral needs to acknowledge their fears (See Chapters Two and Three).

Worshipping God

A Christian funeral is a great worship experience in which we acknowledge the mystery of death and affirm our living hope in God who is loving, merciful, close, concerned, and powerful. (See Chapter Two for a discussion of our assurance as we face the mystery of death.) In a time of confusion and distress Christians gather for corporate worship and not for some sentimental ditty.

It is a way of expressing our gratitude to God for the gift of life, particularly the life we have shared with the deceased. . . . We also affirm the worth and dignity of human life even in the face of death.¹⁶

We express our faith in the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord from which nothing--not even death--can separate us (Romans 8). We witness to God's sovereignty over both life and death. As we confront stark reality, we affirm that death is not the end, but that God will call us anew and grant new life. We exult in the triumph of God's love over death. (See Chapter Two for a discussion of why it is better to talk about "resurrection" than about

¹⁶Doss, p. 67.

"immortality of the soul.") In a simple and direct way, Christian funerals express the values and hopes of the Christian community, and direct thoughts and feelings toward spiritual realities that can undergird the bereaved and give meaning to all of life.

There was a time when it was popularly accepted that funerals were choice opportunities to save the souls of a captive audience of those who rarely set foot in the Church. One preacher held up a Church membership card and said, "This is your ticket to heaven." Other preachers even gave altar calls. Instead of offering strength and hope to the bereaved, such evangelistic revival meetings compound grief and alienate people from the Church and its resources. Funerals are not the time to convert sinners. It is highly doubtful that people under emotional stress are able to make the kind of decision that conversion involves anyway. Yet, the minister can witness to the Gospel at such a time. Those present, consciously or unconsciously, judge the Gospel and the Church by the spirit in which the service is conducted. The minister must not forget that he stands before those gathered at the funeral as Christ's ambassador. It is a humbling thought.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS AND PRACTICES

Pre-planning

A good time to make funeral arrangements is before death comes, when they may be discussed freely and realistically. There is nothing morbid about discussing death and funerals with one's family, clergyperson, and mortician in advance, without the pressure of grief and the need for immediate action. For those who might not leave anyone capable of or interested in making arrangements, for those who have definite preferences about their funerals, and for those who want to leave helpful suggestions for the survivors, pre-planning is a way of expressing one's desires. Preparedness can spare the finances of the survivors. As was pointed out in Chapter One, the bereaved are not inclined to "shop around." Planning one's funeral permits one to explore all of the alternatives. Talking about one's own funeral stimulates a person to face his own mortality, thus making his life richer.

In planning one's own funeral one must remember the needs and rights of the survivors. Leaving some suggestions as to what one desires can spare the survivors a difficult ordeal and can avoid a lot of inter-family squabbling as to what you would want done. (In seven out of ten cases it is

the widow who must make the arrangements at time of need.)¹⁷

It is not always wise to shield those one loves from pain.

William L. Bustard of National Selected Morticians explains,

A well-meaning person may instruct his family to disregard the body, eliminate the funeral, and refuse to grieve. . . . Over-protecting the bereaved by suggesting evasion or denial of the reality of death is ill advised.¹⁸

The process of making arrangements when someone has died can be beneficial in helping the bereaved to face the painful reality and begin grief work.

It is important to make suggestions and not to dictate binding instructions. This approach permits the bereaved to participate in planning and to help themselves. It is important that one's comments be clear and not use such words as "usual" or "customary." One might want to suggest such things as the location of the funeral, specific musical selections and poems and Scripture readings, names of people who might participate (such as, ministers, mortician, pallbearers, guest book attendant, ushers), and the manner and place of final disposition. Such suggestions can be reviewed periodically and updated as one's preferences change.

¹⁷ Forest Lawn Pictorial Map and Guide (Glendale, CA: Forest Lawn Memorial Park, 1971), p. 2.

¹⁸ Hoover Rupert, Where is thy Sting? (Nashville: Graded Press, 1969), pp. 172-173.

While alive one should convey his wishes to the living. Pre-arrangements should be communicated to those who will be responsible so that they understand and accept one's wishes. Copies of one's suggestions should be given to those who might plan the funeral, such as, relatives, close friends, ministers, and mortician. They should not be put in a safety deposit box or a will, which might not be examined until after the funeral.

The Minister's Pre-funeral Calls

Ideally, the pastor will be among the first to be notified of a death. He should immediately make a pastoral call on the bereaved. His caring presence represents the love of the Christian community. He should concern himself with establishing rapport and allowing the bereaved freely to express their feelings.

In future calls the effective pastor will continue to enable the bereaved to express their feelings, opening the door for grief work. He should be sensitive to the needs which the bereaved express explicitly and implicitly, taking their feelings into account for his future ministry with them.

Of course, a common aspect of a pre-funeral call concerns itself with the details of the funeral service. The minister is in need of certain facts. The following check list might be helpful to keep in mind:

Name
 Nickname
 Residence
 Family Telephone
 Date of Birth
 Place of Birth
 Age
 Date of Death
 Cause of Death
 How She/He Spent Final Years, Months, Days
 Family Information
 Spouse's Name
 Number of Years Married
 Previous Marriage
 Children
 Ages
 Grandchildren
 Great-Grandchildren
 Brothers
 Sisters
 Parents (Living?)
 Closest Friends
 Occupation
 Number of Years
 Church Participation
 Organizations "To Which She/He Belonged
 Hobbies
 Funeral Event
 Officiant(s)
 Date of Service
 Time
 Place of Interment
 Thoughts To Be Included In Biographical Statement
 Words To Describe Him/Her
 Special Thoughts To Be Included In Funeral
 Music
 Singing
 Readings

Even such a discussion can be of aid to the bereaved in beginning their grief work by facing the reality of death and bringing their feelings to the surface. Everything that is done in pre-funeral calls should pave the way for a helpful relationship.

The Minister's Preparation

Death is to a great extent unpredictable. It is no respecter of pastoral schedules. It can occur at the most difficult and inconvenient times. The minister may go for weeks without a single call, but let him take a day off, and the telephone may ring several times.

The time to make ready for usefulness in a funeral service is long before the call has come. Time may allow for only one brief visit with the grief-stricken home and a mere day--a day crowded with other responsibilities--to prepare a significant funeral event. The wise minister will spend a good deal of spare time preparing for this ministry. It is the part of wisdom for the minister to keep a file overflowing with funeral resources, such as, hymns, Scripture references, poems, and orders of worship. Such a resource can be a precious treasure chest.

The Funeral's Location

Since a Christian funeral is a worship event, it is fitting and proper to hold the funerals of people who are Church-related in the familiar surrounding of the Church, and to hold them when the congregation has opportunity to be present. There are times, of course, when good reasons require that the service be conducted elsewhere. When the service cannot be in the Church building, bring the Church

to the service. Maximize personal involvement and corporate support.

Funeral Costs

Some Exploitation. The majority of Americans think that funerals are overpriced. Eighty percent of the thirty thousand Psychology Today readers surveyed in 1971 reported that funerals are very much overpriced.¹⁹ Ruth Harmer's The High Cost of Dying and Jessica Mitford's The American Way of Death complain that morticians take advantage of the bereaved, manipulating and exploiting the situation--prevailing upon the desire to "do what's right" and to provide "a decent burial"--to sell people needlessly elaborate services which they do not need and cannot afford. It is true that in the funeral industry, as in any business, there are people who play on the grief of their clients and sell the most expensive funeral "the traffic will bear." A salesman might urge the bereaved to spend more money because "After all, this is the last thing you can do for mother." Playing on the bereaved's status or on their guilt, a mortician might tell them that their choice is not good enough for them or for their dearly departed. Most morticians, however, will not rob or mislead the bereaved. According to a study made by the National

¹⁹ Warren A. Shibbes, Death (Whitewater, WI: Language Press, 1974), p. 234.

Selected Morticians covering all types of communities in every state and Canada, for the calendar year 1974, the mortician's profit before income tax was 4.9%.²⁰ Morticians will not jeopardize their business future by tarnishing their reputation. (See Chapter One for a discussion of the funeral industry and our choice of coffins.)

Guidelines. Funerals do cost money. To simply cry that a cheap funeral is a good funeral and an expensive funeral is a bad funeral is an inadequate basis for judging a service. Christian stewardship and wisdom should be exercised in funeral expenditures. There is no need to keep up with the Joneses. The bereaved should not spend more money than they can afford. The pastor ought to be an intelligent friend of his people, but not a protective guardian. The time of death itself is not the time to reshape values. Values should be clarified in advance.

Relieve Guilt. Swiss Psychiatrist Paul Tournier has observed, "there is no grave beside which a flood of guilt feelings does not assail the mind"²¹ (See Chapter Three). Some persons are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt.

²⁰ A Helpful Guide to Funeral Planning (Evanston, IL: National Selected Morticians, 1975), p. 17.

²¹ Doss, p. 66.

Gift-giving is generally employed as a means for acting out guilt feelings. In selecting the coffin, flowers, and other funeral expenditures, guilt whispers, "Nothing is too good for him!" The funeral itself is regarded as a last gift. Unfortunately, sacrificial funeral expenditures are one way we who are economically oriented have for expressing and relieving guilt. We are "our own chief victimizers."²² Dr. Jay R. Calhoun, director of the Life-Cycle Institute in San Diego, California, explains that the cost of the "casket" (which means, "jewel box") and other funeral expenditures should not be over the financial means of the bereaved, but not under their psychological needs.²³

Memorial Societies and Cremation Societies. Among the groups that are fighting for low-cost funerals are the memorial societies. Some 130 memorial societies have spawned, selling memberships entitling members to "modest" funerals.²⁴ Memorial societies use group bargaining power

²² Ruth Mulvey Harmer, The High Cost of Dying (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1963), p. 13.

²³ Statement by Jay R. Calhoun in course AM256 Living with Death, at The School of Theology at Claremont, July, 1975.

²⁴ United Press International dispatch, "The Cost of Dying--Reality or Myth?" Progress-Bulletin (Pomona, CA), (February 18, 1973), p. A-6, cols. 1-2.

to obtain for their members comparatively inexpensive funerals from cooperating morticians.

Cremation services are being increasingly adopted in California. The Neptune Society, founded in 1972, the Telophase Society, started in 1970 in San Diego,²⁵ and the Cremation Society of California Incorporated, located in Glendale, are commercial organizations that specialize in cremation which is usually followed by disposal of the cremains at sea--an ancient Scandinavian custom.²⁶ All or a considerable part of the cost is paid out of Social Security death benefits. Such services provide an alternative to the mortuary/cemetery system.

Unfortunately, these societies are often not getting the job done but are merely taking orders for disposals. Limiting their concern to economics, their approach often undercuts grief work by reinforcing the illusion that death is not real. There is an unhealthy movement in our death-denying culture toward immediate disposition of the body with no funeral and toward services without any physical remains. Death is still real even when we hide it in the closet.

²⁵ Russell Chandler, "The American Way of Death Is Changing," Los Angeles Times, (June 7, 1975), part I, p. 26, Cols. 1-2.

²⁶ Ibid.

Flowers

As was mentioned in Chapter One, flowers and funerals seem to go together in our culture. Although probably not the wisest use of financial resources, floral gifts are one way the community expresses its concern for the bereaved. It is, of course, ridiculous for the bereaved to incur financial obligations during the funeral which will be a drain on their resources for years to come.

Rather than overflowing the chancel with banks of flowers, arrange them in the narthex of the Church. The flowers of the immediate family might be placed on the altar. Instead of placing a spray atop the coffin, more and more Churches are following the custom of using a funeral pall which emphasizes the equality of the rich and the poor. After the funeral, instead of letting the flowers wither and wilt it would be better to preserve them for Sunday's worship services or find some other use for them.

Children and Funerals

Well-meaning parents often commit the error of shielding a child from the funeral. Such a decision may be an attempt to spare the child pain that is "too much for him to bear" or it may reflect the adult's thinking that the funeral will not meet the child's needs. Dr. Herman Feifel thinks that such a decision "tends to reflect the

anxieties and concerns of the adult rather than the child's actual ability to cope with the situation."²⁷

Generally, a child should be permitted and encouraged to share with the family on the sad but momentous occasion of the funeral. The child cannot fully understand all that happens, but to deprive him of his sense of belonging can confuse him and even damage his future development. Edgar Jackson addresses this issue when he says that the child "can understand his inclusion far better than he can understand his exclusion."²⁸ Such a supportive event can unify and strengthen a family. It can encourage the expression of feelings. It can prevent the child's imagination from developing unrealistic ideas and fears. (See Chapter Three for a discussion of "Children and Grief.")

Dr. Kübler-Ross holds the opinion that a child's first funeral experience should not be with the death of a

²⁷David Hendin, Death as a Fact of Life (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 146.

²⁸Edgar N. Jackson, "Helping Children Cope With Death," in Austin H. Kutscher and Lillian G. Kutscher (eds.) Religion and Bereavement (New York: Health Sciences, 1972), p. 163.

loved one but should be a funeral of a stranger.²⁹ A child should not be forced to attend a funeral and should not be made to feel guilty if he resists going. Those who stay home should be left in an emotionally supportive environment. Those who go to the funeral should be prepared in advance by an honest explanation of what to expect. Answering the child's questions in a truthful manner and maintaining physical contact (such as, handholding) will put the child at ease.

Displaying Dead Bodies

Viewing. It has become a standard American "tradition" to display dead bodies for "viewing." Opinion on "viewing" runs the whole gamut from those who think it is therapeutic to those who think it is grotesque and barbaric. Franklin Delano Roosevelt requested that his body not be viewed after his death. He felt that the viewing of a lifeless, bloodless mass of flesh and bones would constitute an invasion of his privacy.³⁰ Others find the custom of viewing a painted and propped corpse repugnant.

For many of the living, the traumatic experience

²⁹ Sam Keen, "Ideas for Living; No. 15/An Interview With Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross," Family Circle, (September 1975), 51.

³⁰ Maurice Lamm and Naftali Eskreis, "Viewing the Remains: a new American custom," Journal of Religion and Health, V (April 1966), 140.

of seeing and touching the dead body can be a healthy step in getting on with the task of grieving and "burying the dead." It is understandable that people want to evade painful experiences; yet, confronting the dead body can help the living break through psychological denials and move toward healthy grief work. It is hard to deny death when viewing the remains. Paul Irion explains that facing the dead body

can help the mourners to realize that life and death have intersected and that the relationship to the deceased as they have known it is now ended. It now has entered into a new dimension.³¹

Many people say, "I would prefer to remember my brother as he was and not see him laid out in a casket."³² This may reflect denial because the simple fact is that he is not the way he was--he was alive, now he is dead. The confronting of this fact breaks through denials and can produce the atmosphere for the outpouring of genuine feelings. One widow, not atypical, said: "I didn't believe he was dead until I saw him in the casket."³³ Mourners who,

³¹Irion, p. 89.

³²Ann Landers, "Absence at funeral an affront," Progress-Bulletin (Pomona, CA), (November 2, 1975), 13.

³³Ira Oscar Glick, Robert S. Weiss, and C. Murray Parkes, The First Year of Bereavement (New York: Wiley, 1974), p. 110.

for one reason or another, do not view the body, tell of difficulties in facing reality.

Preparing Bodies for Viewing. Dead bodies should be treated with respect since they retain dignity even in death. It would be callous to treat indifferently the body after death or to discard it like a piece of garbage. This is not an argument for the present-day mortician's art of masking death with an illusion of life. Cosmetologists strive to disguise the fact of death; they dress the dead man in a stylish suit and lay him in a coffin as if he were asleep, even though a man does not usually sleep in a suit in a coffin! The mortician might minimize the destruction done to the body by a lingering illness or a violent accident; the mourners may be comforted to see the dead person at peace. But there is no need to erase the lines of toil or the marks of age. There is no need to make a ninety-two-year-old person look fifty-two. There is no need to disguise the reality of death. When a person is dead he just does not look the same. Let the dead be dead.

Every person has a feeling for his own body. Edgar Jackson explains, "we try not to do things to a dead body that would stimulate strong reactions to our own body image."³⁴

³⁴ Jackson, For the Living, p. 42.

This may be a reason we place dead bodies in "comfortable-looking" coffins. We tend to feel complicated and largely unconscious sensations the dead person "is now incapable of feeling. We know this doesn't make sense, of course, but we also know. . . . that some emotions are outside of the sphere of the logical and rational."³⁵ (For a further discussion of the American custom of displaying dead bodies see the sections on the "Contributions of Funeral Directors," "Embalming," "Cosmetology," "Stylish attire," and "Coffins" in Chapter One.)

When to View. The important psychological benefits of viewing the body can be satisfied prior to the funeral service. The family and others with strong emotional ties to the dead person who wish to "view" the body may do so before the funeral.

Visitation. The custom of holding "visiting hours" at the mortuary provides the community the opportunity to view the body and extend their personal concern to the bereaved. As the bereaved tell the story of the dead person's death over and over again, reality is reinforced. On the death of his father, Bradford Smith anticipated the "visiting hours" with dread, thinking the custom to be ghoulish and barbarous; but, he gives the following account of what actually took place:

³⁵Ibid.

It turned out to be an unforgettable and heart-warming experience. His brothers and nieces, exposing an affection we too often fail to reveal directly, told me things I had never known about him. His dearest friend dropped in. I had expected and feared a rather lugubrious sermon. Instead, warm and smiling memories of their early days together. Men I did not know came to tell me how he had found them a job, given friendly encouragement, made them feel welcome in church, and had taken them as strangers into his home. I discovered then that my father lived on in many lives, not only in mine and my brother's.³⁶

When to Close the Coffin. In a nationwide study conducted by Dr. Roger Blackwell and Dr. Wayne Talarzyk for The Casket Manufacturers Association of America, over eighty percent of the respondents indicated that if they were arranging a funeral for a relative or close friend that they would either (1) request that the coffin be open during the visitation and closed at the funeral or (2) request that the coffin be open during both the visitation and funeral.³⁷ This contrasts with the fact that most Americans disapprove of displaying their own corpses in open coffins (seventy percent of the thirty thousand surveyed by Psychology Today gave this response).³⁸ Morticians, of course, want to display the product of their art.

³⁶Bradford Smith, Dear Gift of Life: A Man's Encounter With Death (Wallingford, Pendle Hill, 1965), pp. 29-30.

³⁷"Embalming Art or 'Snafu'--Who Cares?" Ideas Today, I (November-December 1974), 3-4.

³⁸Shibles, p. 234.

The coffin should be closed before the funeral service begins and generally never again opened. To have an open coffin at a funeral seems to focus upon the dead body as the center of worship. Keeping the coffin closed gets away from the grueling custom of concluding the funeral by having all of the people--mourners, curiosity seekers, and those who do not want to view the body--parade past the open coffin in a kind of "death march."

Memorial Services. The practice of having memorial services without the presence of any physical remains of the person who has died may seem to do away with some of the faults of the average funeral, but such a practice may be for some persons a part of death denial. The funeral with the physical remains present impresses the reality of the situation upon the bereaved, enabling them to engage in grief work. Memorial services often avoid stimulating emotional expressions and focus at the intellectual level. They are in danger of presenting a dualistic understanding of man rather than a wholistic understanding.³⁹ (See Chapter Two for a discussion of the dualistic myth.) The presence of physical remains, whether a body in a closed coffin or cremains in a container, makes the funeral service specific and unique.⁴⁰

³⁹Paul E. Irion, The Funeral (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), pp. 213-216.

⁴⁰Jackson, For the Living, p. 52.

Of course, a public committal service and burial could begin the funeral event, although it seems somewhat out of appropriate sequence.

ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

Music

Somber music which has been used in the past has given "funeral music" a bad name. The sickly soft tones of the electric organ are obnoxious. Much of the music that is played at funerals is theologically, aesthetically, and psychologically unworthy.

The comfort and hope of certain music is great. It may elicit emotions, but this, of course, need not be bad. The selection of all of the music, instrumental and vocal, should be in keeping with the purposes of the funeral which are discussed earlier in this chapter.

The bereaved will often suggest specific music.

Paul Irion comments,

The pastor has the right and obligation to maintain his own integrity by tactfully rejecting selections of hymns which are theologically incorrect, aesthetically inappropriate, or psychologically harmful.⁴¹

But the pastor must remember that "on psychological grounds there may be real benefit in allowing the family to make a selection. They will undoubtedly select hymns that

⁴¹Paul E. Irion, The Funeral and The Mourners (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 110.

are meaningful to them."⁴² However, a word of caution: if the music they select is a favorite of the person who died, the later association may be negative; if the funeral is a negative experience, they may never hear the music again with pleasure, remembering that it was part of such a funeral.

As in other worship events, the congregation may be encouraged to join in the singing of hymns. Congregational singing can give the comforting feeling of solidarity. When it is not possible to sing, the minister should not overlook the possibility of involving the congregation in reading hymns without accompaniment. Some hymn may seem particularly appropriate in terms of the life and work of the person who died. Other appropriate hymns might include: Isaac Watts' Eighteenth Century "O God, Our Help in Ages Past,"⁴³ John Newton's "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound,"⁴⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick's "God of Grace and God of Glory,"⁴⁵ Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is our God,"⁴⁶

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," in The Book of Hymns (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1966, p. 28.

⁴⁴John Newton, "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound," *ibid*, p. 92.

⁴⁵Harry Emerson Fosdick, "God of Grace and God of Glory," in *ibid.*, p. 470.

⁴⁶Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *ibid*, p. 20.

Ray Palmer's "My Faith Looks Up to Thee,"⁴⁷ William J. Irons' "Sing with All the Sons of Glory,"⁴⁸ or John Greenleaf Whittier's "I Know Not What the Future Hath."⁴⁹ Possibly have a choir lead everyone in singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" as a recessional.

Scripture Readings

Carefully selected Scriptures, read effectively, can renew the strength and quicken the hope of the bereaved. Appropriate selections will recognize and speak to the particular needs and feelings of the bereaved in their unique situation. Passages found in books of worship are not applicable to every funeral. But the pastor who prepares suitable Scriptures for specific occasions can bring comfort. Clergypersons who read long, complicated, and gloomy passages with weak whining voices do not meet the needs of those who mourn.

Poetry Selections

The reading of selected poems can have value in Christian funerals. Although gifted poets express their own

⁴⁷Ray Palmer, "My Faith Looks Up to Thee," in *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴⁸William J. Irons, "Sing with All the Sons of Glory," *ibid.*, p. 440.

⁴⁹John Greenleaf Whittier, "I Know Not What the Future Hath," in *ibid.*, p. 390.

deep feelings and hopes, these feelings and hopes may be shared by the bereaved. The pastor needs to test his selections against the purposes of the funeral. It is especially important to beware of poems which are only syrupy sentimentalisms or attempts to deny the reality of death.

Prayer

Prayers--silent, corporate, and pastoral, whether "free" or selected from a book of worship--need carefully to recognize and deal with the needs of the bereaved. To be meaningful and related to the purposes of the funeral, prayers usually need to be prepared and evaluated beforehand. Prayers at funerals include prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of intercession, and prayers of petition. Through prayer we confess our fears and our reluctance to face death. Through prayer we express our thanksgiving for the gift of life, particularly for the life of the person who has died; we express our thanksgiving for the comforting nearness and availability of God; and, we express our thanksgiving for the promises of the Gospel. Through intercession we express the feelings of the bereaved and seek God's sustaining power and love. Through petition we seek the gift of faith and God's help for the painful process of grief, demonstrating an understanding of the feelings of all who mourn. Prayer

can include personal references without going into detail. Paul Irion reminds us that the inclusion of the Lord's Prayer "prayed in unison . . . is an effective way of witnessing to the unity of the fellowship."⁵⁰

Biographical Statement

Eulogies were already given thousands of years ago. The most famous in the Old Testament is David's eulogies over Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1:17-27).⁵¹ In rabbinic times the delivery of a eulogy was a well-established practice. The eulogy was usually based on Scriptural texts and was embellished with parables. It was considered commendable to arouse loud lamentations and weeping (Berakhot 6b). But the speakers were warned not to exaggerate the praises of the dead person: "Just as the dead are punished (for their sins), so the funeral orators are punished (for exaggerated praise of the dead)" (Berakhot 62a).⁵²

Words are inadequate to fully summarize a life. All the complex values, motives, emotions, achievements cannot hope to be comprehended in some brief statement. Statistics tell us so much and yet so little about a person.

⁵⁰Irion, The Funeral and the Mourners, p. 102.

⁵¹Julius H. Greenstone, "Funeral Oration," The Jewish Encyclopedia (1903), V, 529.

⁵²Irion, The Funeral and the Mourners, pp. 110-111.

They tell us where the person has been, what he has done; but they do not tell us what difference his life has made, nor the relationships he has had. The value in recounting important moments in the life of the person who has died is that it will encourage the bereaved to recall their memories and express their emotions.

The minister can construct a brief statement using what pertinent facts he can gather. It is important to be sure of the facts and make no statement which could not be substantiated in a court of law. Flowery statements which are exaggerated half-truths and bear false witness can only do harm. There should be no attempt to appraise the life of the person who has died. The bereaved do not come to the funeral to hear the sinner condemned to Hell or the saint canonized. The person who gives the biographical statement needs only to paint realistic word-pictures.

If the officiant does not know anything about the dead person, then he should not say anything about him. The officiant might invite those present at the funeral to participate by making their own one-sentence statements describing what the dead person meant to them.

Sermon

Funeral sermons are usually worth what they cost. Clearly, some are very "cheap." Inappropriate sermons are poorly prepared and poorly delivered, too long, trite, dull,

and harshly evangelistic--bringing comfort to no one. Rather than using the same generalities and sugary piety funeral after funeral, the funeral sermon is an opportunity to declare faith and hope and to bring comfort. In the Christian community, a brief and imaginative sermon can acknowledge the stark reality in the time of grief and affirm the hope of resurrection faith, testifying that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8).

The sermon should speak to where the bereaved are. They will probably be in no condition for logical reasoning and may not even really hear what the minister says, so the tone of the sermon is especially important. The sermon can be suited to the individual needs of the bereaved in their particular situation. By showing an accurate understanding of the feelings of the bereaved and by emphasizing the importance and validity of their emotions, the sermon can bring help to the bereaved. Rather than condemning their tears and exhorting them to stoical fortitude, it ought to enable them to see through their tears.

Committal Service

The committal service is usually a brief service of Scripture readings, words of committal, prayer, and benediction. The dominant theme is leavetaking, entrusting the dead person to God's love. The service also petitions God's comfort and expresses the needs of the bereaved and

hope of resurrection. Paul Irion explains:

It is an extremely difficult time for the mourners. . . .
 There is an element of completeness and finality. . . .
 The committal service provides, as nothing else in
 the funeral does so graphically, a symbolic demonstra-
 tion that the kind of relationship which has existed⁵³
 between the mourner and the deceased is now at an end.

It is not necessary to conceal the good, raw dirt and the
 scar of the grave under a carpet of simulated grass.

Following the benediction, the officiant can invite the
 congregation to express their concern to the family. He
 can lead the congregation by going to each family member
 and offering a firm handclasp.

Post-funeral Ministry

The Pastor's ministry to the bereaved does not end
 when he leaves the funeral. Building upon the pastoral
 relationship which was formed in the pre-funeral calls
 and the funeral itself, it is essential for the pastor to
 extend his caring presence through the first year follow-
 ing the funeral. Pastoral calls on the wedding anniversary
 and the anniversary of the funeral can be especially helpful.
 As the impact of the crisis touches the lives of the
 bereaved, the pastor should be accessible to assist them
 in doing their grief work well. (See the discussions in
 Chapter Two on "Depression in the Face of Loss and Loneliness"

⁵³Abraham E. Millgram, Jewish Worship (Philadelphia:
 Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), p. 331.

and "Duration of Grief.")

A CHRISTIAN FUNERAL

ORGAN PRELUDE (Hymns of praise and thanksgiving)

*CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: We are gathered to remember the life of Larry Trent, to support one another in our loss and to celebrate the hope of our resurrection faith.

People: To affirm with praise and thanksgiving the love of the Lord.

Leader: Blessed be the Lord! for he has heard our cry for mercy.

People: The Lord is our strength and our shield; in him our hearts trust. (CF. Psalm 28:6-7a)

*HYMN "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" Isaac Watts.

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of thy throne Still may we dwell secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone, And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God, To endless years the same.

A thousand ages, in thy sight, Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night, Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever rolling stream, Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come;
Be thou our guide while life shall last, And our eternal home!⁵⁴

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (unison)

O God, our Father, from whom we come, and unto whom we return, we confess our fear and our slowness to accept death. We confess our reluctance to entrust to you those whom we love. Enable us, in the presence of death, to put our trust in you and to worship you that we may find mercy and grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁵⁴Watts, p. 28.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. (from Romans 8:33-34; Psalm 103:17a)

THE AFFIRMATION

Leader: Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

People: Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

(from Psalm 90:1-2 R.S.V.)

Leader: The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,

People: my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior. (from II Samuel 22:2-3 R.S.V.)

All: If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(from Romans 8:31b-32, 35, 37-39)

*GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end.
Amen, Amen.

NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS: Ephesians 3:14-21 The New English Bible

With this in mind, then I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through

his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God's people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you attain to fullness of being, the fullness of God himself.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive, by the power which is at work among us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation evermore! Amen.

HYMN "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound" John Newton

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved:
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many danger, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,⁵⁵
A life of joy and peace. Amen.

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Larry Trent died while asleep in the living room of his Ontario home on January 5, 1976, the day before his eighty-fifth birthday.

⁵⁵Newton, p. 92.

On January 6, 1891 there was born, the first of three children to Joseph and Amanda Trent at Lake Eunice, South Dakota, the one we have affectionately known as Larry Trent. In 1907 he married Clara Hollister in South Dakota and their children are Alfred and Edna. At his death, Larry was the oldest father in our Church family. The love of Larry's children for their father tells about him as a father.

Larry came to Ontario many years ago. For thirty-eight years he worked as postmaster. Many of us have shared with him the passing years. There come to us in these moments many memories which will be cherished in our hearts and minds.

Larry loved his Church. It would be impossible to write the history of this congregation without mentioning him again and again. He especially enjoyed the fellowship of the United Methodist Men and the Sunday School class. I am sure that God must be pleased that one of his children found so much joy in the life he gave him. We thank God for Larry and all he did for others in the spirit of Christ through the Church.

Larry leaves behind him many relatives and friends whose lives touched his life. His family will miss him terribly: their atlas, their encyclopedia, their translator, their tour guide, their organizer of fiestas, their political mentor, their gift giver, their teller of tales, their

wound dresser.

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
But life is a journey,
a going--a growing
From stage to stage.

From childhood to maturity
And youth to age.
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom.

From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding--
From fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat--
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey,
stage by stage.
A sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
But life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage
Made stage by stage--
From birth to death⁵⁶
To life everlasting.

THE WORD OF COMFORT AND VICTORY

We are gathered together in this sanctuary where
we have so often come together in the past. But today our
coming together is different. We have never been here

⁵⁶ Poem ("Birth Is A Beginning") shared by Rabbi Bernard Cohen in course AM256 Living with Death, at The School of Theology at Claremont, July, 1975, original source unknown.

before for this purpose, and we will never be here again for this same purpose. As the shock of Larry's death engulfs us in sadness, we face one of the most painful times of life.

Larry's death was not a surprise, it was anticipated. Yet we feel the pain of separation. Larry will never again dig in the garden, nor play with the kitty Patsy, nor sit quietly in the cool breeze on the front porch reading the paper; and we will yearn for his presence. When several hearts have become one, death rips apart the one heart.

Now the fact that we as Christians believe that life is not obliterated at death does not remove the pain of separation--the pain that seems at times unbearable. We grieve the loss of one who was very precious.

We have all kinds of feelings. We may feel shocked, disorganized, afraid, angry, guilty, depressed. At times these feelings will come welling up and pouring out. During the biblical period, when death came, all the relatives and friends gave vent to their grief, aloud. They moaned and smote their breasts. God's sustaining care provides the strength to face our feelings and does not demand that we inhibit them. There is healing value in this expression. But it is painful work and it takes time. Yet we cannot remain immune. Buried feelings fester.

It is not heroic or brave to ignore our true feelings.

God provides us with tears to express our deepest feelings. When our Lord wept, no one accused him of being weak or unmanly or of lacking faith in God.

There is no time in life when we recognize our helplessness and feel more lonely than in times like this. We may feel isolated and lonely in the midst of a crowd; but, "it is one thing to be lonely; it is an entirely different thing to be alone."⁵⁷ We are not alone. How blessed we are to have a God to whom we can turn when our hearts are overwhelmed. How grateful we are that God has given us loved ones and friends who surround us with expressions of concern.

Our security in the present moment and our assurance about the future are grounded in God's love poured into our hearts. God will not disappoint us (Romans 5:5).

Through the centuries the Church has tried to communicate a faith that is founded on the fact that God has shown his care for us in Jesus Christ. The rapture of this faith finds its supreme expression in Paul's words which we used as our affirmation. Neither life nor death, the living nor the dead, are beyond the scope of God's loving care and merciful concern. That is all I need to know. It is light enough to live by. We have the tremendous

⁵⁷R. Earl Allen, Memorial Messages (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1964), p. 36.

assurance of the triumphant love of God in Christ, from which no power--"nothing whether we live or die"--can ever separate us. In the Cross God displays such love that we can trust He will care for one as he ought to be cared for. Even the forces which we admit to be mighty are powerless to cut us off from Him whose "steadfast love endures for ever" (Psalm 136 R.S.V.). God maintains His Lordship over death--Larry's death and our own deaths. "To know that dying need not cut us off from the Love which has made life worthwhile is the most comforting reassurance I can imagine."⁵⁸

Our glorious hope in Christ is that the Author of resurrection faith will not leave us in death, that he will call us anew, beyond death, and grant the fullness of new life. Death is not the last word. No life is forgotten. "God will not break faith . . . in the fellowship he has established, nor will he let it be annulled by death."⁵⁹ The "last enemy" is conquered.

O, "It does not yet appear what we shall be: But we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2). Ultimately, death remains a mystery to us.

⁵⁸Glen W. Davidson, Living with Dying (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), p. 96.

⁵⁹Helmut Thielicke, Death and Life (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 198-199.

Before this mystery we confess
 The smallness of our faith;
 For we are indeed afraid of the dark.
 We do indeed mourn for the lost--
 Or rather for our own lonely evenings.⁶⁰

But, our final resource is not the explanation that is clear to us but the God of unconditional self-giving love who is real to us. Death strikes one who is loved. The proper and adequate future for our existence can be entrusted to God. "If we live, we live unto the Lord; if we die, we die unto the Lord, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:18). Thus the only way we can die is to die into God's hands. We are in faithful hands, a bank that will not break. And so we can sing with Joseph H. Gilmore:

He leadeth me: O blessed thought!
 O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
 Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
 Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.⁶¹

"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57 R.S.V.).

ANTHEM "Hallelujah Chorus" Handel

PRAYER

Our Eternal Father, Author of life on both sides of death: We thank you for all the memories of Larry. How precious he has been to all of us! We praise you for his faith in the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Especially, we thank you for your grace that kindled love in his heart and enabled him to obtain the victory through him who loves us.

Our grief overcomes us at the sense of the loss

⁶⁰George E. Koehler, "A Time To Mourn--A Time To Dance," (Nashville: Graded Press, 1969).

⁶¹Joseph H. Gilmore, "He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought," *ibid.*, p, 217.

that is ours. With aching hearts, we seek your care when the very foundations of our lives seem to shake beneath us. In the midst of our uncertainty, give us a faith capable of conquering death. We do not pray that we may understand the mysteries of life and death, we only ask that we may see your sustaining light through our tears. Save us from futile regrets. Make your presence real to us, that we may know that you are God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us in word and deed the reality of resurrection. Amen.

*HYMN "God of Grace and God of Glory" Harry Emerson
Fosdick

God of grace and God of glory,
On thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient Church's story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us
Scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;
Free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
For the living of these days,
For the living of these days.

Cure thy children's warring madness,
Bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in souls.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

Set our feet on lofty places;
Gird our lives that they may be
Armored with all Christ-like graces
In the fight to set men free.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
That we fail not man nor thee,
That we fail not man nor thee.

Save us from weak resignation
To the evils we deplore;
Let the search for thy salvation
Be our glory evermore,
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,

Serving thee whom we adore,
Serving thee whom we adore. Amen.⁶²

*BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

Leader: We feel the pain of separation; we are conscious of our loss, but we have hope in Jesus Christ.

People: We have given thanks to him from whom comes life and death and who surrounds us in both. We have affirmed our faith and rejoiced in Christ's victory over death.⁶³

Leader: The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face to shine upon us, and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up his countenance upon us, and give us peace (Cf. Numbers 6:24-26).

People: Amen!

*ORGAN PRELUDE "A Mighty Fortress is our God" (and other powerful, exultant music)

*Indicates Congregation Standing

A COMMITTAL SERVICE

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Leader: Our help and hope is in the name of the Creator, who made heaven and earth (Cf. Psalm 124:8). As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him (Psalm 103:13). At times like this we long to hear a familiar, well-loved voice. For many generations the Bible has been such a voice of strength.

All: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his names sake.

⁶²Fosdick, p. 470

⁶³Jeanne Audrey Powers, "A Remembrance Service for Mona Edith Kewish," in David James Randolph (ed.) Ventures in Worship 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 172.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
 shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the
 in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
 for ever. (Psalm 23 K.J.V.)

WORDS OF COMMITTAL

Forasmuch as Larry's spirit has entered into the life
 on the other side of death, we therefore commit his
 body to its resting place, but his spirit we entrust
 to God's gracious mercy, remembering how Jesus said
 upon the cross, "Father, into your hands I entrust
 my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

PRAYER

Leader: O God of infinite compassion: You alone
 understand the sense of loss that is ours. As
 we stand at this open grave, cherishing
 memories and thanking you for all Larry has
 meant to us, give us the faith to entrust him
 to you. When our loneliness weighs heavily
 upon us, when faith falters and hope grows dim,
 comfort us with the assurance of your everlast-
 ing love. Be our stay, our strength, and our
 shield, that trusting in you we may know your
 presence near, and in the assurance of your
 love be delivered out of our distress;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught his
 disciples to pray, saying,

All: Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name;
 thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 and the power,
 and the glory,
 forever. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. Amen.
(II Thessalonians 2:16-17 R.S.V.)

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